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THE EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

We believe you will find that this issue of FANTASY BOOK is a distinct improvement over the first one, not only in editorial content, but also in over-all appearance. We regret that it was not possible at this time to add the extra eight pages promised in the preceding number. However, those of you who appreciate quality will be tolerant of our beginning problems.

The price per copy of the book paper edition of this second issue has been increased to 35 cents. This price applies to single copy orders only. Subscriptions remain the same: 12 issues for \$3.00. We suggest you send your subscription in *now*. The book paper edition of FANTASY BOOK Number One will soon be out of print.

We will feature a novelette of a strange invasion from the sky in the third issue of FANTASY BOOK. This story is entitled "Out of the Sun" by L. A. Eshbach. "Turnabout" the weird-fantasy omitted from this issue, due to the inclusion of the serial, will also see print in the next issue. And, of course, the second installment of "The Machine-God Laughs"; also, a delightful fantasy, "The Gifts of Asti" by Andrew North; and "Blurb" by E. E. Evans—the tale of a fantasy writer who creates a *very* realistic character—and "Secret Weapon" by Terry Thor, in which the enemy creates the super weapon but make one serious mistake...

FANTASY BOOK will spot-light a new feature in the third issue—a page devoted exclusively to fantasy and science fictional poetry. The page will be edited by Lilith Lorraine, the internationally famous fantasy author and poet. Miss Lorraine is the Founder-Director of the Avalon World Arts Academy, and editor of the literary magazine, DIFFERENT. Fantasy authors and poets will be interested to learn that the Sept-Oct, 1948 issue of DIFFERENT will be entitled "The Conquest of Space", and will feature two short stories (limit 2500 words) and 20 poems (not over 20 lines) on the subject of the conquest of space. The deadline on material submitted for this special issue is July 1, 1948. Send all material, or requests for additional information to DIFFERENT, Rogers, Arkansas.

In closing we would like to mention that we have read with interest the announcement of a new literary magazine to be published in the Los Angeles area. The name is LINE, and we understand the first issue will contain a fantasy story. The address is LINE, 640 Juanita Avenue, Los Angeles 4, California.

The Editors

FANTASY BOOK

VOL. 1

NUMBER 2

GARRET FORD, Editor

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Conform or be exiled, was the decree of the tir....

THE SHIP of DARKNESS

BY A. E. VAN VOGT



IT WAS DIFFERENT, D'Ormand realized, deciding on earth to do something. And actually doing it in intergalactic space.

For six months, he had headed out from the solar system, away from the gigantic spiralled wheel that was the main galaxy. And now the moment had come to take his plunge into time.

A little shakily D'Ormand set the dials of the time machine for 3,000,000 A. D. And then, his hand on the activator, he hesitated.

According to Hollay, the rigid laws that controlled the time flow on the planets would be lax and easy to escape from, here in this sunless darkness. First of all, Hollay had said, accelerate the ship to maximum velocity, and so put the ultimate possible strain on the fabric of space. Then act.

Now! D'Ormand thought, sweating. And pushed the plunger

hard. There was a sickening jar, a steely screeching of wrenched metal. And then again the steady feel of flight.

D'Ormand's vision was swimming. But he was aware, as he shook the dizziness out of his head, that he would be able to see again in a moment. He smiled with the grim tenseness of a man who has risked his life successfully.

Sight came abruptly. Anxious, D'Ormand bent towards the time machine control board. And then drew back, shocked. It wasn't there.

He looked around, incredulous. But his was no big ship, requiring detailed scrutiny. It was one room with an engine, a bunk, fuel tanks and a galley. Nothing could be hidden in it. *The time machine wasn't there.*

That was the metal tearing sound he had heard, the machine wrenching itself off into time, leaving the ship behind. He had failed. He was still groaning inwardly when a movement caught the corner of his eye. He turned with a painful jerk of his body.

High in the viewing plate he saw the dark ship.

One look; and D'Ormand knew that, whatever the reason for the time machine's departure, it had *not* failed.

The ship was close to him. So close that at first he thought it was the nearness which made it visible. And then, the eerie reality of its lightless state penetrated. He stared, and the first fascination roared into his mind, the first realization that this must be a craft of the year 3,000,000 A. D.

Fascination faded before a thrill of doubt that gathered into a blank dismay. Abruptly, it wasn't only the fact that he could see it that was unnatural. There was the ship itself.

Out of some nightmare that ship might have sailed. At least two miles long, half a mile wide, *a foot thick*, it was a craft fit only for such a darksome sea as space itself. It was a platform floating in the night of interstellar emptiness.

And on that broad deck, men and women stood. Naked they were, and nothing at all, no barrier however flimsy, protected their bodies from the cold of space. They couldn't be breathing in that airless void. Yet they lived.

They lived, and they stood on that broad dark deck. And they looked up at him, and beckoned. And called.

The strangest call it was that had ever come to a mortal man. It was not a thought, but something deeper, stronger, more moving. It was like a sudden body-realization of thirst or hunger. It grew like a craving for drugs.

He must land his spaceship on the platform. He must come down and be one with them. He must! . . . primitive, unrestrained, terrible desire . . .

With a rush, the spaceship glided to a landing. Immediately, with the same terrible urge, his desire was for sleep.

D'Ormand had time for one desperate thought of his own. Got to fight, came that flash of inner warning. Got to leave, leave. At once.

Sleep came in the middle of horrendous fear.

Silence! He was lying with eyes closed in a world that was as still as—

D'Ormand couldn't find a mental comparison. There wasn't any. There wasn't anything in his entire existence that could match the intense stillness, the utter absence of sound that pressed against him like—

Once again there was no comparison. There wasn't any pressure. There was only the silence.

Strange, he thought; and the first remote impulse came to open his eyes. The impulse faded; and there remained in his mind the measured conviction that surely he, who had spent so many months alone in a spaceboat, must know the full meaning of silence.

Except that in the past there had been the faint ssshhh ssshhh of the inhalation and exhalation of his breathing, the occasional sucking sound of his lips on a tube of nourishing soup, and the movements of his body. This was—what?

His brain wouldn't make a definition. D'Ormand opened his eyes.

At first, sight offered the barest variation of impression. He was lying partly on his side, partly on his back. Nearby, blotting out the stars, was a torpedo-shaped blob about thirty feet long and twelve feet high. Aside from that there wasn't anything in his line of vision but stars and the darkness of space.

Normal enough. He had no fear. His mind and its life

seemed far away. Memory was an even remoter adjunct. But after a moment there trickled to the surface of his will the desire to place his physical position relative to his surroundings.

There had been, he remembered weightily, a dark ship. Then sleep. Now stars and interstellar night . . . He must still be sitting in the control chair gazing at the viewing plate and the vista of heavens it revealed.

But—D'Ormand frowned mentally—he wasn't sitting. He was lying on his back, staring up, up . . . at a skyful of stars and at a blob of something that looked like another spaceboat.

With an owl-like detachment, his brain argued against that impression. Because his was the only earth spaceship in that part of the universe. There couldn't be a second ship . . .

Just like that D'Ormand was on his feet. He had no consciousness of getting up. One instant he was sprawling on his back. Now he was standing, swaying . . .

He was standing on a broad deck beside his spaceboat. The deck, everything, was plainly visible in a dim fashion for its entire length and width. And all around him, near and far, were naked men and women standing, sitting, lying down, paying him not the slightest heed.

He was clawing—clawing with senseless fingers at the air lock of the spaceboat, striving to tear it open by strength alone.

After a mindless period of time, his spaceman's training began to dictate those automatic, desperate movements of his body. He grew aware that he was studying the lock mechanism anxiously, tugging at it gingerly, testingly. Then he was stepping back, surveying the small ship as a whole.

Out of some unplumbed reserve of calm there came to D'Ormand at last the will and the ability to walk quietly around the spaceboat and peer in at the portholes. The inside was a dim well of familiar mechanisms and metal shapes, the sight of which brought a spasm of returning frenzy, easier to fight this time.

He stood finally very still, holding his mind clear of extraneous ideas, thinking one simple, straightforward thought, a thought so big that all his brain was needed to hold it, to balance it, and comprehend the immense reality of it.

And it grew harder, not easier, to grasp that he was on the platform ship. His brain started to twist, to dart off in streaks of doubt and fear and disbelief. But always it came back.

It had to. There was no sane elsewhere for it to go. And there was nothing, utterly nothing to do but wait here until his captors showed by action what further fate they intended for him.

He sat down. And waited.

An hour at least went by, an hour like no other in the history of his world: a man from 2975 A. D. watching a scene on a space liner of thirty thousand centuries later.

The only thing was, and it took the whole hour for the fact to sink in, there wasn't anything to watch except the incredible basic scene itself. Nobody did anything. Nobody seemed to be remotely aware that he was on the ship. Occasionally in the dimness a man strolled by, a figure that moved against the low-hung stars, plainly visible as was the whole dark deck and its cargo of superhuman beings.

But no one came to satisfy his growing lust, his *need* for information. With a tingling shock the realization came finally to D'Ormand that he must make the approach himself, force the issue by personal action.

Abruptly, he felt astounded that he had half-lain, half sat there while the precious minutes flowed by. He must have been completely dazed, and no wonder.

But that was over. In a burst of determination, he leaped to his feet. And then, shaking, he hesitated. Was he actually in-

tending to approach one of the crew of this ship of night, and ask questions by thought transference?

It was the alien-ness that scared him. These people weren't human. After three million years, their relation to him had no more meaning than that of the ape of his own day that shared his ancestry.

Three million years, 16×10^{10} minutes; and every few seconds of that inconceivable span of time, somebody had been born, somebody else had died, life had gone on in its tremendous, terrifying fashion until here, after unthinkable eons, was the ultimate man.

Here was evolution carried to such limits that space itself had been conquered by some unguessable and stupendous development of biological adaptation—stupendous but so simple that, in a single sleep period he, a stranger, had been miraculously transformed into the same state.

D'Ormand's thought paused there. He felt a sudden uneasiness, a sharp, disturbing consciousness that he couldn't possibly have the faintest idea how long he had been asleep. It could have been years, or centuries. Time did not exist for a man who slept.

It seemed abruptly more important than ever to discover what all this was about... His gaze came to rest on a man a hundred feet away, walking slowly.

He reached the moving figure; and then, at the last instant, he shrank back in dismay. Too late. His hand, thrusting forth, had touched the naked flesh.

The man turned, and looked at D'Ormand. With a contorted gesture, D'Ormand let go of that unresting arm. He cringed from eyes that blazed at him like points of flame stabbing through slitted holes.

Curiously, it wasn't the demoniac quality of the gaze itself that brought thrills of funk surging along D'Ormand's nerves. It was the soul that peered from those burning eyes, a strange, alien spirit that stared at him with an incomprehensible intensity.

Then the man turned, and walked on.

D'Ormand was trembling. But after a moment he knew that he couldn't hold back. He didn't let himself think about it, just walked forward and fell into step beside the tall, enigmatic stroller.

They walked on, past groups of men and women. And now that he was moving among them, D'Ormand noticed a fact that had previously escaped him. The women outnumbered the men three to one. At least.

The wonder about that passed. He and his companion strolled on in that strangest of promenades. They skirted the edge of the ship. Forcing himself to be casual, D'Ormand stepped to one side, and stared down into an abyss a billion light years deep.

He began to feel better. He ransacked his mind for some method of bridging the mental gulf between himself and the dark stranger. He thought: It must have been telepathy they had used to compel him to land his spaceship. If he concentrated around an idea now, he might receive an answer.

The train of thought ended because at that point he noticed, not for the first time, that he was still clothed. But suddenly he thought of it from the angle: *they* had left him dressed. What was the psychology?

He walked on, his mind blank, head bent, watching his trousered legs and, beside him, the naked legs of the thing man pumping along steadily.

Just when the first impressions began to steal into him, D'Ormand was only vaguely aware, so gradually they came. There was a thought about the hour of battle drawing near; and that he

must prove himself worthy before then, and so live forever on the ship. Otherwise, he would suffer the exile.

It was like quantum. One instant he was only dimly conscious of that alien blur of ideas. The next his mind made a frantic jump to the new comprehension of his position.

The effect of the warning grew stronger. In abrupt shock of fear, D'Ormand headed for his spaceboat. He was tugging at the impassive entrance before the realization penetrated with finality that it offered no means of escape. Exhausted, he sank down on the deck.

He became amazed at the extent of his fright. But there was no doubt of the cause. He had received information and a warning. A gelid, a bleak and steel-like warning: He must adjust to the ways of this ship before some fantastic battle was joined and, having proved worthy, live here forever.

...Forever! It was that part of the idea that had for solid minutes staggered the fulcrums of his reason.

The mood yielded to the dark drift of minutes. It seemed suddenly impossible that he had understood correctly the tiny tide of ideas that had been directed at him.

A battle coming up. That was senseless. Be worthy, or suffer exile! Suffer what? D'Ormand wracked his brain, but the meaning came again: Exile! It could mean death, he decided finally with a cold logic.

He lay, his face twisted into a black frown. He felt violently angry at himself. What a stupid fool he had been, losing his nerve in the middle of a successful interview.

It *had* been successful. Information had been asked for, and given. He should have held his ground, and kept his mind clenched, concentrated on a hundred different questions in turn:

Who were they? Where was the ship going? What was the drive mechanism of the great platform liner? Why were there three women to one man?

The thought trailed. In his intensity, he had jerked into a partial sitting position—and there not more than five feet away was a woman.

D'Ormand sank slowly back to the deck. He saw that the woman's eyes were glowing at him unwinkingly. After a minute, uneasy, D'Ormand turned over on his back.

He lay tense, staring up at the bright circle of the galaxy he had left, so long ago now. The points of light that made up the glorious shining swirl seemed farther away than they had ever been.

The life he had known, of long swift trips to far planets, of pleasurable weeks spent in remote ports of space, was unreal now. And even farther away in spirit than it was in time and space.

With an effort, D'Ormand roused himself. This was no time for nostalgia. He had to get it into his head that he faced a crisis. The woman hadn't come merely to look at him. Issues were being forced, and he must meet them.

With abrupt will, he rolled over and faced the woman again. For the first time, he appraised her.

She was rather pleasing to look at. Her face was youthful, shapely. Her hair was dark. It needed combing, but it wasn't very thick, and the tousled effect was not unpretty. Her body!—

D'Ormand sat up. Until this instant, he hadn't noticed the difference between her and the others. She was dressed. She had on a long, dark, form-fitting gown, made incongruous by the way her bare feet protruded from the voluminous skirt.

Dressed! Now there could be no doubt. This was for him. But what was he expected to do?

Desperate, D'Ormand stared at the woman. Her eyes were like dead jewels staring back at him. He felt a shaken wonder: What

incredible thoughts were going on behind those shining windows of her mind? They were like closed doors beyond which was a mental picture of a world three million years older than his own.

The idea was unsettling. Queer little twisting movements blurred along his nerves. He thought: Woman was the nodal, man the anodal. All power grew out of that relationship, especially as the anodal could set up connections with three or more nodal.

D'Ormand forced his mind to pause there. Had he thought that? Never.

A jerky thrill made a circuit through him. For once more, the strange neural method of communication of these people had stolen upon him unawares. And this time he knew that one or four women could form a relationship with a man. Which seemed to explain why there were so many women.

His excitement began to drain. So what? It still didn't explain why this woman was here so near him. Unless this was some fantastic offer of marriage.

D'Ormand studied the woman again. There came to him finally the first sardonicism he had known in months. Because after twelve years of evading the inticements of marriageable young women, he was caught at last. There was no such thing as not verifying that this woman had come over to marry him.

The man's threats had made preternaturally clear that he was working under a time limit.

He crept over, took her in his arms, and kissed her. In crises, he thought, action must be straightforward, un-selfconscious, without guile.

After a moment he forgot that. The woman's lips were soft and passive. There was no resistance in them, nor, on the other hand, was there any awareness of the meaning of the kisses. Putting his lips to hers was like caressing a small child; the same immeasurable innocence was there.

Her eyes, so near his own now, were lighted pools of uncomprehending non-resistance, of passivity so great that it was abnormal. Immensely clear it was that this young woman had never even heard of kisses. Her eyes glowed at him with an alien indifference—that ended.

Amazingly, it ended. Those pools of light widened, grew visibly startled. And she drew away, a quick, lithe movement that carried her in some effortless fashion all the way to her feet. Instantly, she turned and walked off. She became a shadowy figure that did not look back.

D'Ormand stared after her uneasily. There was a part of him that wanted to take ironic satisfaction out of the rout he had inflicted. But the conviction that the defeat was his grew with each passing second.

It was he who was working against time. And his first attempt to adjust to the life of the dark ship was a failure.

Uneasiness faded, but did not go away entirely. And D'Ormand made no effort to push it further. It was well to remember that he had had a warning. A warning that either meant something or didn't. Folly to assume that it didn't.

He lay back, his eyes closed. He was not reacting well. An entire period he had been within the pure life of Iir, and still he was not becoming attuned.

Eh! D'Ormand started. He hadn't thought that.

He jerked up, opening his eyes. Then he shrank back. Fire-eyed men stood in a rough circle around him. He had no time to wonder how they had gathered so quickly.

They acted. One of them put out his hand. Out of nothingness a knife flashed into it, a knife that glowed in every element of its long blade. Simultaneously, the others leaped forward,

grabbed D'Ormand, and held him. Instantly, that *living* knife plunged down towards his breast.

He tried to shriek at them. His mouth, his face and throat muscles worked in convulsive pantomime of speech, but no sounds came. The airless night of space mocked his human horror.

D'Ormand shrank in a stark anticipation of agony, as that blade ripped through his flesh and began to cut.

There was no pain, not even sensation. It was like dying in a dream, except for the realism of his writhing and jerking, and at the same time, he watched with a dazed intensity the course of the knife.

They took out his heart; and D'Ormand glared at it like a madman, as one of the demon-things held it in his hand, and seemed to be examining it.

Insanely, the heart lay in the monster's palm, lay there beating with a slow, steady pulse.

D'Ormand ceased struggling. Like a bird fascinated by the beady eyes of a snake, he watched the vivisection of his own body.

They were, he saw at last with a measure of sanity, putting each organ back as soon as they had looked at it. Some they studied longer than others—and there was no doubt finally that improvements had been achieved.

Out of his body came knowledge. Even in that first moment, he had a dim understanding that the only drawback to perfect reception of the knowledge now was that he was translating it into thoughts.

The information was all emotion. It tingled along his nerves, titillated with subtle inflections, promised a million strange joys of existence.

Slowly, like an interpreter who understands neither language, D'Ormand transformed that wonderous flow into mind-forms. It changed as he did so. The brilliance seemed to shed from it. It was like squeezing the life out of some lively little animal, and then staring disappointedly at the dead body.

But the facts, hard and stripped of beauty, poured into his brain: They were the Iir. This platform was not a ship; it was a force field. It moved where they willed it to go. To be one with the life energy; that was the greatest joy of existence, reserved by Nature Herself for men. The nodal power of women was necessary to the establishment of the field, but man, the anodal power, was the only centre of the glorious energy.

The strength of the energy depended on the unity of purpose of every member of the ship; and as battle with another platform ship was imminent, it was vital that the Iir attain the greatest possible measure of union and purity of existence; for only thus would they be able to muster that extra reserve of energy necessary to victory.

He, D'Ormand, was the jarring factor. He had already rendered one woman temporarily useless as a nodal force. He must adjust—swiftly.

The wonder knife withdrew from his flesh, vanished into the nothingness from which it had been drawn; and the men withdrew like naked ghosts into the dimness.

D'Ormand made no attempt to follow their progress through the night. He felt exhausted, his brain battered by the cold-blooded violence of the action that had been taken against him.

He had no illusions. For a few minutes his staggered and overwhelmed mind had been so close to insanity that, even now, it was going to be touch and go. In all his life, he had never felt so depressed, which was a sure sign.

Thought came slowly to his staggered mind: Surely, the ability to live in space was a product of the most radical evolution over a tremendous period of time. And yet the Iir had adjusted him,

who had never gone through that evolution. Strange.

It didn't matter. He was here in hell, and the logic of why it couldn't be had no utility. He must adjust mentally. Right now!

D'Ormand leaped to his feet. The action, outgrowth of strong determination, brought a sudden awareness of something he hadn't noticed before: gravity!

It was about one G, he estimated quickly. And it wasn't that there was anything unusual about it in a physical sense. Artificial gravity had been common even in his own day. It was simply that, though the Iir might not realize it, its very existence showed their earth origin.

For why else should beings who lived in the darkest regions of space need anything like that? Why, when it came right down to it, did they need a ship?

D'Ormand allowed himself a grim smile at the evidence that human beings remained illogical after three million years, felt better for his brief humor—and put the paradox out of his mind.

Straight for the spaceboat he headed. It wasn't that there was any hope in him. It was just that, now that he was going to force every issue, explore every possibility, his spaceship could not be missed out.

But disappointment did come, a twisting tide of it. He tugged, and pulled determinedly, but the mechanism remained lifeless to his touch. He peered in, finally, at one of the portholes; and his brain banged inside his head, as he saw something that, in his previous more frantic surveys, he had missed because the instruments in question were edgewise to him. There was a glow; the power dials were shining in their faint fashion.

The power was on.

D'Ormand gripped the porthole so tightly that he had to force himself to relax before his mind could grasp at the tremendous thing that was here:

The power was on. Somehow, in landing on the dark ship, perhaps in that last terrible will to escape, he had left the controls on. But then—a vast amazement struck D'Ormand—why hadn't the machine raged off? It must still have a terrific latent velocity.

It could only mean that the gravity of the platform must have absolutely no relation to his original conception. One G for him, yes. But for a resisting, powered machine it must provide anything necessary.

The Iir weren't responsible for keeping him out of his ship. For purest safety reasons, the airlocks of these small spaceboats wouldn't open while power was on. They were built that way. As soon as the energy drained below a certain point, the door would again respond to simple manipulations.

All he had to do was to stay alive till it would again open, then use the fullest application of his emergency power to blast away from the platform. Surely, the platform wouldn't be able to hold him against the uttermost pressure of atomic drivers.

The hope was too great to let any doubt dissolve it. He had to believe that he could get away, and that in the meanwhile he would be able to find the young woman, placate her, and examine this anodal-universe energy business.

He must survive the battle.

Time passed. He was a night-clothed figure in that world of darkness, wandering, searching for the young woman he had kissed, while above him the bright galaxy visibly changed its position.

Failure made him desperate. Twice, D'Ormand sank down beside groups composed of a man and several women. He waited beside them for a communication, or for the offer of another

woman. But no information came. No woman so much as looked at him.

D'Ormand could only think of one explanation for their utter indifference: They must know he was now willing to conform. And that satisfied them.

Determined to be encouraged, D'Ormand returned to his lifeboat. He tugged tentatively at the mechanism of the airlock. When it did not react, he lay down on the hard deck, just as the platform swerved sharply.

There was no pain, but the jar must have been of enormous proportions. He was sliding, sliding along the deck, ten... twenty... a hundred feet. It was all very blurred and swift; and he was still lying there, gathering his startled mind into a coherent whole, when he saw the second ship.

The ship was a platform that looked about the same size as the one he was on. It filled the whole sky to his right. It was coming down at a slant; and that must be why the Iir ship had turned so violently—to meet its opponent on a more level basis.

D'Ormand's mind was throbbing like an engine, his nerves shaking. He thought: This was madness, nightmare. What was happening couldn't be real. Utterly excited, he half rose, the better to see the great spectacle.

Beneath him, the Iir-platform turned again. This time there was only a faint shock. He was flung prostrate, but his hands broke his fall. Instantly, he was up again, staring in a fever of interest.

He saw that the huge platforms had been brought to a dead level, one with the other. They were pressed deck to deck. On the vast expanse of the second ship were men and women, naked, indistinguishable from the Iir; and the tactical purpose of the initial maneuvers was now, it seemed to D'Ormand, clear.

It was to be an old-fashioned, piratical, immeasurably bloody boarding party.

... Force himself, D'Ormand thought. Under no circumstances must he be a jarring factor in the great events that were about to burst upon the unoffending heavens.

Trembling with excitement, he sat down. The action was like a cue. Out of the night the young woman bore down upon him.

She came at a run. She still had on the dark gown. It was a hindrance of which she seemed but dimly aware. She flung herself on the deck in front of him. Her eyes glowed like large ovals of amber, so bright they were with excitement and—D'Ormand felt a shock—dread.

The next instant his nerves tingled and quivered with the weight and intensity of the emotion-forms that projected from her:

She was being given another chance, the startling message came. If he would use her successfully now to make himself an anodal centre, it would help to win the great victory; and she would not suffer exile. She had bedimmed the forces of purity by liking what he had done to her.

There was more. But it was at that point that D'Ormand's mind ceased translating. He sat amazed. It hadn't really struck him before, but he remembered suddenly the men had said he had already ruined one woman temporarily as a nodal centre.

With one kiss!

The old, old relationship of man and woman had, then, not lost its potency. He had a sudden vision of himself racing around like a thief in the night stealing kisses from every woman he could find, thoroughly disorganizing the dark ship.

With convulsive mental effort, he forced the idea out of his head. Silly, stupid fool! he raved at himself. Even having thoughts like that when every element in his body should be con-

concentrating on the supremely important task of co-operating with these people, and staying alive.

The young woman pushed at him violently. D'Ormand returned to reality. For an instant, he resisted. Then her purpose penetrated: Sit cross-legged, hold her hands, and lose his mind...

Physically, D'Ormand complied. He watched her take up a kneeling position facing him. She took his hands finally in her own, and closed her eyes. She looked as if she were praying.

Everywhere, he saw, men and women were forming into groups where the man sat cross-legged and the women knelt. At first, because of the dimness, it was difficult to see exactly how two or more women and one man managed it. But almost immediately he saw such a group to his left. The four simply formed a small circle, a chain of linked hands.

D'Ormand's mind and gaze plunged off towards the second ship. There, too, men and women were sitting, holding hands.

The stars looked down in that hour, it seemed to D'Ormand's straining senses, on a sight they were never meant to see, the ultimate in prayerful preliminary to battle. With a bleak and terrible cynicism, he waited for the—purifying—sessions to end, waited for the glowing knives to flash out of empty space, and come alive in the eager hands that were probably even now itching for action.

Cynicism... the ultimately depressing fact that after thirty hundred thousand years... there was still war. War completely changed, but war!

It was at that black moment that he became an anodal centre.

There was a stirring in his body, *something* pulsing. It was like an electric shock, like a roaring fire, except that there was no actual shock, no agony of burning.

It was a singing flame that grew in intensity. And grew. And grew. It became an exultation, and took on a kaleidoscope of physical forms.

Space grew visibly brighter. The galaxy flared towards him. Suns that had been blurred points in the immense sky billowed into monstrous size as his glance touched them, sinking back to point size as his gaze swept on.

Distance dissolved. All space grew small, yielding to the supernal ken that was his. A billion galaxies, quadrillion planets reeled their manifold secrets before his awful vision.

He saw nameless things before his colossal mind came back from that inconceivable plunge into infinity. Back at the dark ship at last, it saw, in its unlimited fashion, the purpose of the battle that was proceeding.

It was a battle of minds, not bodies; and the victor would be that ship, whose members succeeded in using the power of both ships to merge themselves with the universal force.

Self-immolation was the high goal of each crew. To be one with the Great Cause, forever and ever to bathe one's spirit in the eternal energy, to—

To what?

The quaver of revulsion came from deep, deep inside D'Ormand. And ecstasy ended.

It was as swift as that. He had a quick, vivid comprehension that, in his wild horror of the destiny the Iir regarded as victory, he had let go the girl's hands, broken the contact with the universal energy. And now he was sitting here in darkness.

D'Ormand closed his eyes, and shook in every nerve, fighting the renewal of that hideous shock. What a diabolical, incredible fate, the most terrifying aspect of which was the narrowness of his escape.

Because the Iir *had* been winning. The destiny of the dissolu-

tion they craved was to be theirs... D'Ormand thought finally, wanly:

That anodal stuff wasn't bad in itself. But he just wasn't spiritually ready to merge with the great forces of darkness.

Darkness? His mind poised. For the first time he grew conscious of something that, in the intensity of his emotional relief, he hadn't previously noticed. He was no longer sitting on the deck of the Iir ship. There wasn't any deck.

And it was damned dark.

In a contortion of movement, D'Ormand twisted—and saw the second dark ship. It was high in the heavens, withdrawing into distance. It vanished even as he was looking at it.

Then the battle was over. But what?—

Darkness! All around! And instantly certainty came of what was here: The Iir had won. They were now in their glory, ecstatic portions of the universal energy itself. With its creators gone, the platform had returned to a more elemental energy state, and become non-existent... But what about his spaceship?

Panic poured in waves through D'Ormand. For a moment, he strove desperately to see in all directions at once, straining his vision against the enveloping night. In vain. Comprehension of what had happened came in the very midst of his search.

The spaceship must have departed the instant the platform-ship dissolved. With its enormous latent velocity, with power still on, the machine had shot away at ninety million miles a second.

He was alone in the vast night, floating in intergalactic space. This was exile.

The first vaulting passion of his fears folded back, layer on layer, into his body. The accompanying thoughts ran their gamuts, and passed wearily to a storeroom of forgotten things somewhere in his brain.

There would be a lot of that, D'Ormand reflected grimly. What was left of his sane future would be an endless series of feelings and thoughts, each in its turn fading with the hours. Mind pictures would come of the young woman.

D'Ormand's thought jumbled. He frowned in a frantic surmise, and jerked his head this way, that way. He saw the shape of her finally, faintly silhouetted against a remote hazy galaxy.

She was quite near, he estimated after a blank, frenzied moment, not more than twelve feet. They would gradually drift towards each other, and begin to spin in the manner of greater bodies, but the orbit would be exceedingly close.

It would be close enough for instance for them to establish a nodal-anodal circuit. With that Olympian, all-embracing power, he would locate his spaceship, flash towards and into it, instantaneously.

Thus did night and aloneness end.

Inside the spaceship, D'Ormand busied himself with plotting his position. He was acutely aware of the young woman hovering around him, but the work demanded all his attention. First, he must locate by patient hit and miss methods the new galactic latitude and longitude of the great beacon of the skies, Antares. From that it would be simple to find the 3,000,000 A.D. position of glorious Mira.

Mira wasn't there.

D'Ormand flexed his fingers in puzzlement, then he shrugged. Betelgeuse would do just as well.

But Betelgeuse didn't. There was a big red star of its dimensions more than 103 light years short of where the super-giant should have been. But that was ridiculous. Such a thing would require a reversal of his figures.

D'Ormand began to tremble. With wavering pen, he plotted

the position of Sol according to the devastating possibility that had just smashed at him.

He had not gone into the future at all, but into the past. And the time machine must have wrenched itself badly out of alignment, for it had sent him to approximately 37,000 B. C.

D'Ormand's normal thought processes suffered a great pause. Men *then*?

With an effort, D'Ormand turned to the young woman. He seated himself cross-legged on the floor, and beckoned her to kneel and take his hands. One instant of anodal power would take the ship and its contents to earth, and prove everything.

He saw with sharp surprise that the girl was making no move towards him. Her eyes, gently brown in the suffused light, stared at him coolly.

She didn't seem to understand. D'Ormand climbed to his feet, walked over, pulled at her arm, and motioned her down to the floor.

She jerked away. D'Ormand gazed at her, shocked. Even as the realization penetrated that she had determined never again to be a nodal auxiliary, she came forward, put her arms around him, and kissed him.

D'Ormand flung her off. Then, astounded at his brutality, patted her arm. Very slowly, he returned to the control chair. He began to figure out orbits, the braking strengths of the nearest suns, and the quantity of power remaining for his drivers. It would take seven months, he reasoned finally, long enough to teach the girl the rudiments of speech...

Her first coherent word was her own version of his name. She called him Idorm, a distortion that rocked D'Ormand back on his mental heels. But it decided him on the name he was going to give her.

By the time they landed on a vast, virgin planet alive with green forests, the earnest sound of her halting voice had largely dispelled her alienness.

It was easier by then to think of her as Eve, the mother of men.

* * * * *

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The strange creature possessed an extraordinary power..

Little Johnny

BY O. G. ESTES, JR.

IN THE SHADOWS of the far side of the inn's central courtyard someone was making a commotion, carefully but vigorously beating the shadows at the base of the wall. Suddenly, into the moonlit portion beneath me, darted a swiftly moving yellow and black striped, spider-like beast. It scuttled across the courtyard, its many legs flashing and blurring in the moonlight. It seemed of a size again larger than the tarantula of my native land, but it moved so fast that I only had a glimpse of it ere the scullery boy had appeared in pursuit, his stick beating a fierce tattoo at the earth beneath the balcony.

My curiosity getting the better of me, I hastened down the stairway almost, as it were, to meet the wicked appearing creature at the bottom. But to my fascinated gaze, it seemed not the many-legged thing I had first seen; no, it seemed to crawl imploringly toward my feet on two spindly legs and its wizened hands. Searching for its eyes I found two soulful orbs which pleaded with mine with a childish, elfin quality which brought the picture of my own baby boy to my mind; my son appeared and faded, the beast touched my foot and hid it with its body. My brain, tumbling with thoughts of the possibility of obtaining a color-graph of the creature, was suddenly all but blasted from its moorings as an excruciating pain struck my foot and journeyed swiftly through my body. As the pain faded, slowly, I reached to pick from the earth the gnarly creature which seemed to be covered with pink, childish skin, and with silky golden hair that glinted in the moonshine. My revulsion changed to interest, yea even liking, as I carried the small creature nearer my eyes where its form and appearance were more readily determined. Vague association in my mind gave me yet further incentive to carry out my original plan of getting a color-graph reproduction of him with the grapher which reposed in my kit-bag in the tap-room.

This thing, this lovely, small, large eyed golden-haired manlike "thing" which I carried, attracted me with its unearthly beauty, stirred me with strange desires for my distant son. Gods, it was long since I had been to that distant home. Looking closely at the body of the creature I found no unsightly protuberances; only a trusting pair of large blue eyes looking back into my own from the small tangle of his golden hair as it nestled within my encompassing hands. It was a sight that stirred me deeply.

As I neared the open doorway of the tap-room, one of my companions gave a startled cry and hastened toward me, his face of horror changing to one of amazement as he got a near view of my small burden.



The child lightly dropped from my careful hands, and as I began to explain the strange happening, it fawningly embraced my friend's right foot, hiding that member with its body. Suddenly, with the very eye-balls starting from their sockets, my friend made as if to kick the child away, but the kick was stopped ere a quiver had shaken the knee, as he turned incredulous eyes upon the lovely little creature which clung there so trustingly. Stooping he enfolded little Johnny in his arms and carried him into the room, the while stroking and caressing his lovely golden hair. I thought it passing strange, however, that he should call my baby son "Robert", but if so he chose, it was just as well.....

"Tell you what," said the little man from Hades, "I grant your wish even before you make it..."

BARGAIN WITH BEELZEBUB

BY GENE HUNTER

SOMETIME DURING the evening, George Langdon had accumulated a full quart of scotch and—a midget. He weaved along the almost deserted side streets in the cold, early morning, the little dwarf trudging unnoticed at his heels. It had, he reflected, been a wonderful party. He didn't remember leaving. He didn't remember much that had happened after midnight, in fact, but now the crisp pre-dawn air was having a sobering effect. It was a highly unpleasant feeling.

Langdon broke the seal on the bottle of Scotch and was putting its mouth to his own when a voice behind him said: "It's cold out here. You could at least offer a man a drink."

Langdon wheeled, nearly stumbling over the little creature who didn't quite come up to his knees. Langdon had a knack of meeting strange people, especially while on one of his binges, but this was the first time he'd ever picked up a midget. Not a midget, really, he thought. Midgets were supposed to be perfectly formed little people. This was a twisted, evil thing. A gnome, Langdon decided. A dwarf.

He was by nature a generous and convivial soul, and he gravely handed the bottle to the little man without a word. The dwarf held the bottle in both hands, tilted his misshapen head back, and let the fiery stuff drain down his throat.

Langdon stared in amazement. What a capacity this creature had! He reached down and angrily retrieved the liquor, but not before the gnome had consumed almost a third of it. "Go away, parasite," Langdon said. "I can't afford to buy Scotch for alcoholic midgets."

"I'm not a midget," the thing said, "and you didn't buy it. You picked it up when you left the party."

"Were you there?" Langdon asked. "'S funny, I don't remember you." He tried to recall the last thing he did remember. He'd had a terrific argument with some writer from out of town—Milwaukee, or some such absurd place. What was his name again? Black? Bleak? Something like that.

This character had been a fantasy writer, he recalled, and their argument had stemmed from Langdon's scoffing at such literature. He remembered that they had gotten into a heated discussion of selling one's soul to the devil, and Langdon had repeatedly suggested that the writer could go directly to his Satanic Majesty's domain.

"I," Langdon had said, "maintain that ish—it's impossible."

"Nonsense," the other had replied. "If there wasn't a foundation for so many legends, they'd have died out long ago. Werewolves, vampires, demons—all must have some basis in fact, as well as in fiction."

Langdon, as usual drunker than anyone else and still on his feet, had said: "You mean that I could, for instance, conjure up a demon or somethin'? Bosh!"

"No," the writer had answered. "Perhaps not you, nor me, nor anyone else today, but sometime in the past there were men who could—and did."

There was a long, blank space in which Langdon could remember

nothing. He had a faint recollection of kneeling on the floor with the fantasy author, while both of them made strange gestures and his more sober companion mumbled inane incantations that sounded the way Sanskrit looked in print.

Then Langdon was wandering home in the wee small hours, with a drinking midget—or gnome. In trying to recall the party, he had almost forgotten the little man behind him until the other began to feel the effects of the liquor and burst into song.

"When I was a l-a-a-d, an' in my teens,
I met a g-i-i-i-r-l from New Orleans,
Her hair was red an' her eyes were blue—"

Langdon shuddered. The gnome had a voice like the door to the Inner Sanctum. It was, in fact, the most hellish voice he had ever heard. He pulled the bottle of liquor from his frayed coat pocket and handed it to the little man to quiet him. The dwarf repeated his performance of a few minutes before, and again Langdon moved to take the bottle back by force. He took a long drink himself.

Langdon staggered on until he reached his apartment with the drunken midget close behind him, the two of them completing the song's many verses in discordant harmony.

Langdon was floating peacefully on a snow-white cloud in the bright blue sky of some fantastic never-never land, all worries and cares forgotten. Then suddenly little men—funny, wicked little men—were invading his cloud castle. He tried to fight them off, but they kept coming back.

He swore. One of them was shaking him by the shoulder. He awoke to see a twisted face peering into his own. He groaned and turned away, and the face spoke. "Come on, Langdon," it pleaded, "quit pushing me off th' bed, huh? Get up. We got work to do."

Langdon sat up. "Who the devil are you?" he growled.

"Well, not 's drunk as I thought. You seem to rec'nize me."

"I don't recognize you," Langdon said flatly. "I don't want to recognize you. I am drunk. Tired. Sleepy. Go 'way."

"I wish you'd make up y'r mind," the little man grumbled. "After all th' trouble you went to to get me here, you don't want me. Gimmie drink."

"Will you get the hell off my cloud," Langdon rasped. "This was a beau'ful dream—you're changing it into a nightmare."

"'S no dream, Langdon," the gnome said.

Langdon was by this time awake enough to remember the little man-thing that had followed him home. "Midgets!" he said disgustedly.

The gnome smiled evilly. "I'm no midget," he corrected. He drew himself up proudly, an effect that was somewhat spoiled when he nearly tumbled off the edge of the bed. "I am a demon."

Langdon thought this over with due deliberation. He took a long drink and handed the bottle to the little man beside him. He jerked it away just before the self-styled demon drank it all.

"Thank you," the demon said politely. "Now let's get on with th' business in hand."

Langdon eyed the nearly empty bottle uncertainly, not sure whether to kill it now or wait for further explanation from this surprising creature. He decided he had better wait. "Business?" he asked.

"I am an em'sary from His Maj'sty, the Prince of Darkness," the demon went on calmly. "You conjured me up—you an' that writer, an' I followed you home. You spoke 'bout selling your soul, I believe."

"Oh," said Langdon blankly, waiting for more.

"First, I grant you one wish, such as money, fame, power—whatever y' want. In return, we get y'r soul when you kick off."

Langdon was seldom so drunk that he could not reason, and he was becoming more sober by the minute. He was wondering just how one humored an insane midget, when the creature put a twisted arm around his shoulder.

"One wish," said the drunken little man from Hades. "Anything 'r all. Tell you what—I grant y'r wish even 'fore you ask it. Anything be fairer than that? Y'r m' pal," he added confidentially.

"Thank you," said Langdon, uncertain of what to say.

"Y' ready? Whatcha want in return for your soul?"

Langdon began to think more clearly. What was it that fantasy writer had said? Something about there having been people in the past who had been able to conjure demons? After all, he reflected, his mind working just under the speed of light, he'd be a complete idiot not to take advantage of a good thing. What if there *was* something to this business, after all?

"I think you're nothing but a drunken refugee from a sideshow," he said warily. "You prove to me that you're a representative from the devil, and then maybe we'll do business."

The demon mumbled something about doubting Thomases. "Well, what d'you want? A li'l atmosphere?" He closed his eyes tightly, concentrating. Misty smoke began to emanate from around his misshapen little body, and Langdon could smell the strong odor of sulphur. The demon seemed to glow, and the man reached out and carefully touched him.

He jumped back in alarm, nursing a blistered finger. "For God's sake, turn it off," he yelped.

The demon relaxed, and the sulphurous smoke began to fade away. "All right," Langdon said weakly. "I believe you. You're the real thing."

The demon was critical. "I can do a lot better," he said, "when I'm sober. You're convinced now? Y' ready?"

"Y—Yes; I'm ready."

"Anything 't all," the demon repeated. "You name it; I grant it."

"Very well," Langdon said, assuming a business-like manner. "I'll tell you what I want for this soul of mine."

"Whatever you want, 's all ready granted. Just name it."

"I want—immortality!" Langdon said. "To live forever, never to die or be killed, always appearing the same age as I am now."

He held his breath, not quite sure what was going to happen. The demon's bloodshot eyes widened in horror and surprise. He was no longer drunk. Suddenly he had been shocked into sobriety—and anger.

"Damn you," he howled, "you can't do that! It's unheard of. It's—" He stammered helplessly, unable to continue.

Langdon eyed the demon appraisingly, and smiled wickedly. "You granted my request before I made it," he pointed out triumphantly. "In exchange, you get—my soul."

"But—but—I was supposed to warn you about things like that," the demon screamed. "You liquored me up and I forgot." The little man from Hell was miserable. "How are we going to get

your soul if you don't die? It's unheard of, I tell you. It's against tradition! I'll probably be banished to some infernal desk job in Purgatory for this stunt."

"Tough luck," Langdon said.

"By Satan," the demon swore, "nothing like this has happened since time began! Of all the..." He stopped suddenly. "Langdon," he said softly, "you're sure you don't want to change your mind."

"Positive."

The demon's wicked little eyes narrowed. "Very well—then you are immortal. But there are a few things you'll have to know."

"Such as...?"

"Such as the fact that you made no provision for money, Langdon. All your life—all your cursed, immortal life—you'll probably have to work. It's going to be a long time. A long, long time."

"For eternal youth," Langdon remarked, "a small price to pay. Besides, with all the time I'm going to have, I can figure out plenty of ways to make easy money."

The demon continued, as if he had not heard. "And don't forget, evolution is still going to change into—something else. That'll leave you a freak, Langdon, to be stared at by..."

"By that time," Langdon interrupted coolly, "men will have reached the stars and planets. They'll settle those, and each world will have its own cycle of life. There'll always be men, chum. Always."

"Nothing frightens *you*, does it?" the demon snarled mockingly. "Nothing can go wrong now, can it, Immortal Man?"

"I can't see how," Langdon said confidently.

"Everything that has a beginning must also have an end—except you, of course. You can never die—can never be destroyed."

Langdon nodded.

"Then all the time that you're enjoying your immortal life, remember that you can have but one possible destiny. Remember that time had a beginning, and it will also have an end. Someday the entire universe will stop, just as quickly as it began."

"But *you* can't be destroyed, Langdon. You'll go on living—existing—whatever you care to call it. Can you imagine a state of complete nothingness, my friend? You'd better try, because that's what it will be, you know. Where the Universe had once been, there'll be nothing but you, the man who can never die, alone forever and ever and ever..."

With these words the demon departed for Hell, leaving Langdon alone in his.

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STAR of the UNDEAD

BY PAUL DENNIS LAVOND

MASTER PILOT DEVLIN stood on the edge of a cliff of nude rock, unhappily flinging jagged flints into the basalt-black sea fifty feet below.

He told McKay: "It's wrong. It's wrong as hell, Mac. Where's the *Stark*?"

Robie McKay shrugged. "Three days is a long time," he conceded. "They should've been back. Or we should have gotten a buzz from them." It had been three days, lacking a couple of hours, since the *Stark* blasted off on its survey flight. This planet of Langell's star was a picayune planet, as they go, and to circle it should have been at most a half-day's trip for the *Stark*. But the *Stark* had not come back.

"My job was to go with them," Devlin said. He ran his hand over the welts left by his helmet radio. "It's my responsibility."

His astrogator said soothingly, "How can you ride herd on a bunch of geniuses? You're in command only out in space; the survey chief runs the show here. Probably they spotted something interesting and just forgot about coming back. You know how childish these great brains can be; don't worry about them."

"Sure," Devlin said moodily. "Sure, don't worry. *You're* not responsible to the Control Commission." He chucked another pebble into the sea and stood up. A master pilot's life was never dull, but there was little safety in it. Since the development of the Guissot converter, when interstellar flight had at last become possible for the Sol-bound human race, the handful of spacemen holding the coveted master's tickets had found themselves exploring many a strange solar system under the aegis of the Control Commission. And varied though the alien planets might be in

appearance, in size and terrain, all had one feature in common. And that was danger.

Somebody shouted. "Hey, Jack! We've found the *Stark*!"

BELATEDLY, DEVLIN and his astrogator heard the rasp of space boots on the rock behind them. They whirled. Running toward them was Mike Harveson, electronics mate for the *Quirinus*, second ship of the two-keel expedition to Langell's Star. He was making heavy going of his race toward them, fighting the thin, tainted air of this ancient world.

"I've been buzzing you for five minutes!" he gasped, almost collapsing as he reached them. "Where've you been?"

"Had my helmet off," Devlin explained tersely. "What about the *Stark*?"

Panting, the electrician said, "We picked them up on the radar, not ten minutes ago. Zeroed in on 'em with the televue, and they're in an orbit. No signs of life; Lentz thinks there's something wrong. He wants you back, pronto!"

Pronto it was. Devlin was in the pilothouse of the *Quirinus*, where it lay behind a crag, before Harveson and McKay straggled back to the entrance port. The automatic ramp of the airlock was still swinging up behind them when Lentz blasted off.

With a jerk of his head Lentz indicated the televue screen while his fingers played over the drive keys. To Devlin he said, "There she is. Can't make radio contact, Jack; they just don't answer. There aren't any lights, either—there's something wrong."

Harveson, trailing into the pilothouse after Devlin, echoed, "Something badly wrong. You can't see it, but you can feel it. It's a dead ship, Jack."

Lentz nodded. "I felt it as soon as I spotted her, as though that weren't the old *Stark* up there at all, full of the lads I've gotten drunk with many a time. What are they doing out here in space like a ruddy moon, Devlin? Maybe I'm just space-happy, but it's got my nerves."

Devlin growled, "You're all space-happy. How could she have gotten out here if anything were wrong? Signal her, Mike."

Harveson glanced over the portsight as Lentz swung the *Quirinus* into a matching orbit. The *Stark* hung only a few miles away, corpse-quiet. He said, "I did. If nothin's wrong, why weren't my calls answered?"

"Transmitter might be out of whack," Devlin grunted.

"And our helio signals?" the electronics mate persisted.

Devlin shrugged, and they studied the *Quirinus*' sister ship in silence. Then, "Pull in," Devlin ordered. "I'm going over there." He hefted the helmet of his vacuum suit, fingers unconsciously checking the air-valve connections.

"Okay," Lentz said. He glanced into the televue at the ship which had carried thirteen of the Control Commission's best extra-solar technicians away from them. As he estimated distance and reached for the keys of the steering jets, brilliant light flickered up at them from the image of the *Stark*. Lentz froze.

"What the devil are they doing?" he grumbled.

IN THE SCREEN they saw a finger of light poke out from the *Stark*'s drive jets. Just for a moment it flashed; then it died. The ship gently nosed ahead, creeping away from them.

"They're alive, anyhow," McKay whispered thankfully.

"I hope so," said Devlin. "But what are they doing?"

He hesitated, then, "Try the helio one more time, Mike," he ordered. "This thing has me worried."

Harveson reached for the blinker gun, flashed an intricate pattern of signals. No answer.

Devlin swore. His brow creased with tense concern, as he said, "Close in on 'em, Lentz. I'll have to go over, anyhow."

Lentz nodded and gave the *Quirinus* a gentle thrust of the main drive; compensated with the starboard steering jet; held his fingers poised over the braking rockets as the *Quirinus* began to advance.

Then it happened. As though alarmed by the approach of its sister ship, the *Stark* began to flare with rocket jets. There was no plan, no order to the flaming tongues of the jets. They blazed wildly in all directions, and the tortured ship seemed to writhe under a dozen different thrusts from as many directions. It blasted away from the *Quirinus* in a tortuous course as its jets flared, died, and flared again in no ordered pattern. Then whoever, or whatever, was in the pilothouse of the *Stark* cut the jets on the side next Devlin's ship. Like a flung stone, the runaway hurtled broadside toward the *Quirinus*.

"Pull away!" Devlin yelled. "They're on a collision course—get us out of here!"

Lentz reacted immediately. His skinny fingers danced over the control keys, whisking the *Quirinus* out of its creeping advance.

Almost they escaped the oncoming juggernaut. The collision was only glancing, but it ripped the heart out of the *Stark* as she rode abeam over the rolling *Quirinus*. The two ships struck, grinding their tons of mass together, and the entire lower half of the *Stark* was planed off. Explosions that would have been thunderous in atmosphere rocked both ships. The reeling *Quirinus*, pitched over on her beam ends by the shock, was an insanity of noise. Above the clamor of screaming metal and the thud of automatic air-brakes slamming shut to seal off breached compartments, Harveson shouted, "The after turret—it's smashed flat! My men were in there, Devlin!" As he spoke, the *Quirinus* reared away from the crippled *Stark*, and Devlin was flung violently across the pilothouse.

Finally the ships drew apart, and Devlin pulled himself to his feet—found himself staggering in a limping circle. McKay and Harveson, although dazed by the terrific shock, seemed all right. He turned to Lentz, strapped into the shock-webbing of the control chair.

But he couldn't help Lentz; nobody could. There is no therapy for a snapped neck, and Devlin was forced to fight the corpse to get at the control keys, tugging at the harness that held it to the chair. The last recalcitrant buckle came undone, finally, and he shoved the body away.

As it thumped suddenly to the deck, Harveson started nervously. "Take it easy!" he said, in mumbled protest. "He was a good guy. Can't you treat him better than that?"

Devlin expertly rectified the eccentric tangent in which the collision had set them, then looked up with suddenly hostile eyes. "So he's dead. What do you want me to do—ask him for this dance?" He jammed a cigarette between his twitching lips, forgetting to light it, and turned back to the control-board. A call from McKay snapped him around again.

The corrected course set by Devlin had swung them about and back alongside the *Stark*, which was an airless wreck, glowing in places with an incandescence from electronic short-circuits. She could have held only dead men. And yet her airlock ramp was moving! It creaked partway open, and jammed. Something stirred behind it; a man squeezed through the narrow gap and hurled himself away from the wreck, toward the *Quirinus*. Through the big portsight Devlin could see him quite plainly: a man of the *Stark*'s crew and most ordinary in space boots and dungarees.

Floating through absolute void, he wore no spacesuit, no oxygen pack on his shoulders.

McKay crossed himself. "Mother of God!" he gasped. "The guy's breathin' pure vacuum!"

AROUND THE MAN clung a hazy luminescence, faintly sparkling, as though it consisted of a myriad of tiny moving particles. Like a living thing, the radiance pulsed and danced about him; seeming, in fact, alive. A clock of coruscating haze, sentient, weaving in nervous little swirls of ghostly light around the man, winking with a thousand evil little eyes! *Wary!*

With second-dragging slowness the form drew nearer until they could see its dead eyes, the wooden expression of the bloodless face. And all the time that malignant haze, with its diabolical little imps' eyes, jostled close about it.

The body floated beyond the view of the telescreen.

McKay swore nervously. "What do you make of it, Jack—did you see it, too?"

"I saw it," Devlin answered softly, "but I don't believe it. And if I did believe it, I don't think I'd like it. I've never seen anybody look so much like a corpse as that one, and live. Where'd he go?"

Harveson pointed to the signal board. "He's come aboard. The stern airlock was just entered, if that indicator means anything."

McKay stirred. "I'd better start earning my pay, and take a little reconnaissance back there. We should have gotten a couple of reports on the bad news by now, anyway, if anybody's alive..." He signed heavily. "Lot of good boys were back there, Jack."

Devlin nodded somberly, then: "Wear your helmet, and talk up for anything serious. We'll track you on the visiphone. Go straight aft, if you can; that lad may need help. He certainly looked sick."

For minutes the silence in the pilothouse was heavy, after McKay's departure. Harveson opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and cut himself off in mid-word. Devlin, staring unhappily at the tiny image of McKay in the ship's televue, was thankful for that silence.

The visiphone crackled slightly, and Harveson increased the amplification. McKay's voice, filtered thin and metallic, came through. "I'm amidship now, Jack. There's a big hole in the hull, and we've lost a lot of air, but structurally the ship's okay." His voice turned bitter. "We lost the crew, though. Most of 'em were in the turret, watching a stereomovie when the *Stark* hit there. The rest suffocated down below when the air went out. They were good boys, Jack," he repeated, almost fiercely.

"Okay, Mac," Devlin monotoned. He would *not* permit himself to think of the friends he'd lost. "Go on aft now; the boy from the *Stark* will be somewhere back there."

With the increased volume they could hear McKay's soft, mournful curses as he worked his way sternward, until he came to the engine room. Its heavy door was ajar, and he slipped easily through it.

The forefront of the chamber was occupied by the engineer's instrument panel and the big generators. Devlin watched McKay turn from these, look past them to the farther bulkhead where the injector breeches of the big rocket tubes were banked solidly to the ceiling. He started back in surprise as he spotted something outside Devlin's range of vision. His voice blasted from the pilothouse speaker in a rattling shout.

"Devlin! That guy's here—he's cutting off your controls!"

Devlin saw him then. The ship could be conned from the engine room, and the stranger was disconnecting the pilothouse controls—was taking control of the ship away from him! He arose at McKay's shout, and his face, looking squarely into Devlin's televue, was ghastly. Pallid, fungiferous in its whiteness, it was void of all life. In the dead, sable eyes flickered a dark, dirty flame, a suggestion of some ghoulish force that negated death. Something unutterably—*evil!*

A sparkling aura surrounded him, a cloud of dancing motes of light. Stardust from hell!

He moved stiffly to attack McKay, a heavy connecting bar in his dead fist. The navigator sprang back, fumbling at his hip for a pistol that wasn't there, dodging as the bar whizzed past his head. Desperately he lashed out, naked fists against copper bar. The living—fighting the dead.

Devlin whipped from the televue. "Grab a blaster and get back there!" he snapped at Harveston. Cursing the necessity that bound him to the pilot's chair, he watched the signal officer race out of the pilothouse, pistol snouting from his hand.

The screen was blank when he returned to it, the transmitter smashed in McKay's battle with the revenant. Spurred by impending tragedy, he punched at the controls to whirl the *Quirinus* away from the planet only a few miles below.

Nothing happened.

The sickening realization that the undead thing from the *Stark* had won over McKay struck him like a blow. And then the crash dive sirens, automatically switched on, screamed hoarsely throughout the ship. Devlin was almost cut in two by his harness as the big exploration rocket plunged planetward under the full thrust of her jets.

Almost stupidly Devlin watched the planet whirl up into a huge mass that filled the big portsight. His hand, trembling a little, rested on the lever that would release the big emergency parachutes in the nose. They wouldn't save anything—they never had yet, in the history of rocketry—but they might force up the bow, mitigate the terrific impact that was coming.

Finally he yanked the lever over. There were explosive noises as one huge umbrella bellied out, and another, and yet another. One by one they issued from their stowage, and were carried away as the *Quirinus* rammed at super-velocity through the air. Convulsive jerks wracked the ship with the emergence of each parachute.

And the prow of the *Quirinus* did pull up a trifle. Just enough to ease the landing from complete catastrophe to mere disaster.

DEVLIN AWOKE in a welter of pain, with the clear, hot knowledge that he had at least one broken rib. He attempted a deep breath, and groaned with the agony that flamed through his chest.

"McKay!" he gasped, still almost unconscious. "Lentz—where are you?"

No answer. Breathing shallowly, Devlin braced himself against the bulkhead and pushed himself carefully to his feet. He seemed unable to orient himself, though this was all so strangely familiar, like a part in some play which he had rehearsed before.

He shook his head. The action sent a wave of nausea flooding through him and his legs, that were made of spaghetti, slid him to the littered desk. For long minutes he lay there, limp, weak, until will power slowly gained control and he thrust the pain and sickness aside. It remained in one corner of his awareness, no longer dominating, and a measure of strength returned to him.

His surroundings began to take on meaning. "God, what a mess!" he muttered. He was in wreckage. Wreckage—like the wreckage of the *Stark*!

Now memory was sweeping him, as a burst of sunlight drives out the shadows from a dark corner. He forced his pain-wracked body erect and ranged the disordered pilothouse with a swift glance, remembered that Harveson was somewhere aft, McKay—McKay probably dead in the engine room, and the thing that killed him loose in the ship.

Armed with a blaster from the weapon chest, he tottered out into the tunnel that ran the length of the grounded vessel. Harveson he stumbled upon accidentally, lurching into the shock-webbing hammock into which the mate had laced himself when the warn-

ing sirens sounded. He was very white, in the soft glow of the *radion* sheathing that lined the tunnel, and very quiet. Delvin knelt laboriously to make a quick examination.

He was alive.

Devlin found nothing more until he limped into the greasy, reeking smoke that fogged the engine room. McKay was there in the generator pit, as dead as he'd ever be with the back of his head smashed in.

And death, real death, had finally come to the zombie from the *Stark*. The breach of one of the big tubes had cracked in the crash landing, vomiting searing flame into the engine room and crisping the invader into a manikin of soot.

He stared wonderingly at the cindery image. What was the shinning haze that had made this dead man walk?

What had happened to the Stark during those three days of silence?

Would it happen, too, to Harveson and himself? Horror, and the pure essence of distilled fear, chilled him as he hobbled back to the unconscious Harveson.

He had not moved. Devlin unstrapped the hammock; gently his sensitive fingers probed the mate's limp body, seeking out broken bones and finding none. He fumbled in the first-aid pouch on Harveson's belt for a tube of anasomniac, snapped it between his fingers to release the biting, stimulant vapor. Harveson stirred, his eyelids quivering, and then, as the pungent gas stung his nostrils, his head jerked back. He awoke.

"Devlin!" he said wonderingly; and then, "We crashed!"

Devlin nodded. "Right as hell. Do you feel all right? No pain, no aches anywhere?"

"I'm all right." Harveson swung his legs to the deck and stood up. "McKay—he's here?" His face twisted in small-boy grief at Devlin's expression. "Oh, hell!" he whispered.

"McKay was my best friend," Devlin said dully, turning away. It was hard for him to think now, with his whole side pulsing and throbbing under hammer blows of pain. To take a breath was almost impossible; movement made him retch. He needed a shot of dope, much as he hated the stuff, if they were to get away from this devil-ridden, star-crossed planet.

Once arrived at the decision to use the drug, he acted quickly, even eagerly, greedy for the surcease of torment. With desperate, jerky movements that ignored the stabbing pangs they caused, he snapped open his own pouch and fished out a syrette. With twitching fingers he uncapped the point, jabbed it into his arm.

For a second the room whirled about him. Then the drug's deadening languor seeped into him. He could feel the pain flowing out of him like water, leaving behind it a wonderful easement, and he almost sobbed with relief.

AN INSPECTION of the ship disclosed no serious damage; nothing apparent that would keep him from rocketing off into space.

The ruptured tube had been a freak, and only that one jet irreparable. They had a chance of saving themselves, and if the circuits of the Guissot converter hadn't been badly scrambled by the crash, they had a good chance.

One thing remained to be done before they set about the long flight home. They carried out the broken bodies of their comrades, incinerated them to feathery ash with a semi-portable atom blast, and raised a cairn to their memory. Devlin had done this for many friends on many planets, but some atavistic urge had impelled him to lay out Robie McKay's corpse in the airlock, awaiting actual burial.

He chose a spot on a low knoll near the battered ship for the dead navigator's grave. Perhaps he had become careless, or perhaps it was only the dulling influence of the drug he had taken,

but while setting up the atom blast to hollow out a resting place for McKay, he had forgotten all possibilities of danger until he heard Harveson's warning shout.

"Devlin! Look out!"

He glanced up—and gasped.

A twelve-foot slug, massive, yet insubstantial as a sunbeam; a comet of shimmering haze. Its formless, transparent body was no more than a glimmer of pale light that pulsed, grew brighter and waned again, regularly as a heartbeat. Shimmering, sparkling, coruscating like the St. Elmo's cloak that had wrapped the undead corpse from the *Stark*!

Around its head clustered a Medusa's wreath of writhing, spidery tentacles of glittering haze.

And, substance or sunbeam, it was hurtling down at them in a plunging dive, sweeping the space before it with an intangible brush of deadly menace.

Devlin dove to the rocky ground as it swooped low over him, wriggled desperately under the squat tripod of the atom-blast projector, clawing his pistol from its holster. As it looped over to return to the attack, he met it with a blinding white bolt. Harveson sent another deadly charge into whatever composed its body.

It shrugged off the bolts, against which no living creature had ever stood!

Both Devlin and Harveson were crack marksmen, and a dozen flame bolts struck the arrowing monster in as many seconds. The air itself flamed blue beneath the blistering barrage, but for all the affect it had upon the living haze, they might have been tossing paper matches at it.

Raging at himself, cursing the negligence which had caused them to be caught out on the barren plain like this, Devlin rose to his knees and swung the big atom-blast projector around on its gimbals. The ravening beam fingered out, roaring through the thin atmosphere.

Harveson shouted in exultation. Nothing could withstand that mighty blast!

But the beam drove through the sparkling menace as though it were composed of nothing. It was like a searchlight piercing a fog, but not dissipating it.

Devlin grunted and cut off the beam. "Talk about your hopeless situations!" he muttered. "You ever been in a worse one, Mike?"

Harveson grinned mirthlessly. "I wouldn't want to be in a worse one," he said flatly, lips tight against his teeth. "Look, we might as well make a break for it, run for the ship."

They cowered close to the ground as the malignant haze swept over their heads. With its passing Harveson raised himself on his elbows and studied the terrain before them. It was bare, devoid of any concealment, naked black rock beneath the weak glare of the distant scarlet sun. He shrugged.

"It's not so far. You run around by that big rock there; I'll go the other way, and one of us ought to get through. Okay?"

Devlin nodded. They touched hands briefly. Then, "Let's go!"

Harveson burst from the slight cover of the atom-blast projector like a stone from a catapult, with Devlin only a step behind. The only sound was the drumming of their boots on the hard, barren ground, the thin sighing of a cold little wind which had sprung up. Devlin cringed inwardly in anticipation of the shining thing's hawk-like swoop. The affair seemed somehow dreamlike, as if he were a manlike little doll, running jerkily toward a toy ship. It was a nightmare in which he ran and ran until he thought his lungs would burst in the vitiated atmosphere, getting nowhere, with refuge at the very end of the infinity that stretched for eons before him.

A hoarse scream snapped him back to reality. He saw Harve-

son, far to his right, stumble to a halt and fling up his pistol as the shining thing banked about in front of him.

He saw Harveson fire two ineffectual bolts before he was enveloped by the sparkling haze, saw him break away. Harveson was allowed a few tottering steps by the creature's cat-cruel play, and the glimmering thing had him again. He fought hysterically, as a cornered animal fights, clawing, kicking, triggering charge after charge into the creature's nebulous substance.

Devlin, stumbling to his aid, saw his distorted face, snarling, with the tears running down the twisted cheeks. Fear had turned Harveson into something inhuman, animalistic—the best fighting machine possible to any creature constructed so inefficiently as a human.

Devlin swore ravingly, himself close to hysteria; he had been on too many alien planets, had seen too many things men were never intended to look upon, and breakdown was near. Driving himself nearer to the fiercely battling Harveson, he sighted a steady bead on the iridescent haze, waiting for a chance to loose a bolt without striking the man.

The chance never came. In the space of a second Harveson's twisted face was wiped clean of all expression; his eyes rolled up until they were twin white glares. His body sagged.

Triumphantly, the living mist whirled him aloft.

"Harveson!" Devlin shouted despairingly, struck shock-still by frozen horror. Then, before the sparkling mist could carry Harveson out of sight, he had jammed his useless pistol back into the holster and was sprinting for the *Quirinus*.

But at the double-valved entrance port, he halted as though he had slammed into a wall of steel.

McKay's body, that should have been in plain sight on the deck, was gone!

DEVLIN BROKE INTO a shambling run, halting at the spot where the navigator's body had lain. A smear of blood was still there, where McKay's head had rested on the deck. The blanket Harveson had drawn over McKay was a crumpled heap a few feet away.

But McKay was gone.

Devlin twisted about and staggered back through the airlock. He stared wildly in all directions, ran in a tottering search around the ship.

There was no trace of McKay's body.

Devlin was beyond wonder as he stumbled back to the pilot-house. There was no time for it; he had no strength for strategy or planning, barely enough to go after Mike Harveson. He thrust his hand down on the starter plunger.

And halted the stabbing motion just above the lever.

A faint, rat-like scuffling sounded from somewhere behind him. He stood for an instant in gelid fright, while the back of his neck tingled with sudden terror, and fear worked cold fingers within his churning stomach. Something was aboard this corpse's ship, something that moved stealthily and with malign purpose.

Something like the shining monster that had siezed Harveson? "Who's there?" he called, dry-throated. No answer. His heart pounded wildly, driving a cold, hard, choking lump up into his throat.

He slipped his blaster free, relishing the feel of the knurled plastic butt in his palm. Useless though it was, he held the weapon ready as he smashed into the silent corridor.

It was empty. He ran on through to the crew's quarters, threw lockers open, rummaged through piles of bedding.

Nothing.

He came to Harveson's cabin.

Empty.

But the thing he had heard was on this ship. Devlin knew

that, knew it with each loudly panting, fear-choked breath he drew.

He stepped down the passageway to the room he and McKay had shared.

And the room was occupied.

Like some mouldering suit of armor standing rigid and untented in the dusty alcove of a crumbling castle, the body of Robie McKay reared stiffly in a corner. Devlin leaped to it, and as his space boots thudded against the metal of the deck, it slid silently to the floor.

Devlin, feet planted wide apart, braced his back against the curved wall. An hysterical giggle came from him.

A good joke! Harveson must have done this to scare him. He rocked with insane laughter at the thought. He must find Harveson, tell him how the joke almost worked. But wait—it was impossible; Harveson was gone, taken away by the shining thing.

His roaring laughter subsided to an idiot cackle. Abruptly intelligence returned to him, and his face creased intently. Had McKay moved?

The stark body before him was shaken by a tremor, was suddenly wrapped in rippling luminosity. Devlin stared open-mouthed as it creaked to an erect position, its blind eyes flickering with a sable flame.

His own eyes focussed unbelievably on the corpse's claw that held a pistol squarely at his abdomen.

"Mac!" he gasped instinctively. "No! Wait—wait, Mac! I'm Devlin, your buddy!"

But he knew that it was not McKay. It was something else, something deadly and cold that drove a lifeless body.

How he managed it, Devlin never remembered. Perhaps in the dead brain of McKay there lingered some memory of humanity that diverted its aim; Devlin was aware only of a chaotic blur of motion as he leaped like an uncoiling spring, ducking under the sizzling blast that charred black splotches on the leather of his jacket.

One arcing fist drove the blaster from the corpse's talon. He grabbed a cold wrist, snapped McKay to the hard deck with a force that should have shattered bones, but the zombie bounced back like a rubber man. Skinny, shrivelled fingers clawed at Devlin's face, gouging away the flesh, scrambled for his eyes, and drew back as Devlin slammed blow after hammer-blow to the sodden body.

There was no time to unholster his own pistol; the zombie fought clumsily, but it was obsessed with persistence. Devlin's blows only rocked it back, hurt it not at all. Time and again it returned, trading brutal punches that sledged against Devlin's agonized side, mauled him, bounced him against the walls, ripped at his face with clawing fingers.

Gasping stertorously Devlin retreated before its vicious attack. A staggering blow landed full on his broken ribs, sent him reeling away with pain and black nausea clouding his vision. As he stumbled back, the zombie plodded brainlessly after him.

Devlin, sobbing for breath against a stanchion, watched its implacable advance with sick eyes. He raised a foot suddenly, sent the zombie rolling with a savage shove, and his hand grasped the pistol he hadn't had time to draw. A great bolt spat from the flaring muzzle, blasted the living corpse, ricocheted from the metal wall in a shower of sparks.

Like blackening paper held over a match, the body of McKay broke, curled into blue flame in the center of the blackness. The flame spread and grew, peeling away the dead flesh until the calcined skeleton showed through. It burned until the body of the revenant was reduced to a crumbling cinder, falling in upon itself.

DEVLIN RELEASED his finger from the trigger. He wiped the blood

from his face with a ragged sleeve. "God!" he whispered, unbelieving.

Then he screamed harshly as the air over the heap of greasy soot shimmered, distorted itself. Luminescence flowed upward from the pile of ash, wrinkled into the sparkling transparency of the shining things!

Instinctively Devlin jerked his pistol up, threw a great sweeping fan of flame to redden the walls with absorbed heat. The misty creature hovered imperturbably, its feathery tentacles waving idly about the indistinct head. Devlin sagged back as the thing stirred, rippled in upon itself, seemed for an instant to take on more definite shape. Then it was broodingly quiet once more, its scintillating nucleus regarding him with a blank stare implicit with menace.

Devlin broke. Dropping the pistol clatteringly from fingers that no longer had strength to hold it, he fled blindly down the corridor. He brought up sharply in the generator room.

The thing was there before him.

And then, with a wonderful sense of relief, Devlin felt all terror leave him. Quietly he regarded the shimmering thing dancing in mid-air before him. With his mind so cleanly washed of all emotion, all sensation but a fatalistic lassitude, he sensed the thoughts of a powerful mentality reaching deep into his brain. There was no hatred in those thoughts. A sort of obscene yearning—

And a detached, pragmatic ruthlessness that left his mind reeling.

The whirl of thoughts ceased, was replaced by a steady resolve on a plane far removed from Devlin's understanding. The creature had studied him, evaluated him, and come to its own decision.

The shining thing's incessant weaving, oddly like the deft footwork of a champion boxer, became a whirling saraband of luminosity. Devlin stiffened as he felt tendrils of alien thought questing again at his brain, vibrations so strange that his mind recoiled before them.

Strange, bodiless combat! Struggle of the mind, not of physical strength! Devlin knew that his own brain was battling, fighting to retain its integrity. How it was fighting, though, what weapons it employed, he could not know, any more than he could know what mental stimulus kept his heart beating ceaselessly, his lungs pumping oxygen to the blood. He did not know; yet, for raw, unmatched savagery, this surpassed any hand to hand struggle of his life. He would emerge victorious, or dead; his inner mind, the subconscious ego that was Devlin, was vulnerable to attack, yet impregnable to invasion. Supreme isolationist that it was, it would perish before any alien intelligence could usurp its place.

DEVLIN, GLASSY-EYED and rigid, sensed that he was losing. His mind was not of a strength that could resist so fierce an attack. Still he knew that he must win; there was a score to even for the men of the *Stark* and the *Quirinus*, for Lentz and McKay and Harveson.

He found that he was muttering aloud, his whole being bent on the struggle. "Damn you!" he whispered thickly. "Damn your rotten, maggotty life, damn your filthy planet, damn—"

The words stopped coming. His tortured nerves lacked even the power of controlling his own lips and vocal cords, and Devlin knew that he was perilously near defeat.

He succeeded in thrusting off the paralysis that gripped him for a second, and took a step. He stumbled, nearly fell. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the red fluorescent Guissot marker, and found time to wonder why it was lit. It was meant to warn the crew from the generator room when the Guissot was in operation, a safety device that would keep men from its cumulatively harmful rays.

Strange that it should be blazing now, when the Guissot lay cold and inert. Strange—but there was more strangeness here than that, and danger beyond the weak radiations of the converter, and it didn't matter.

It did matter!

Hope returned to Devlin, and he dared believe in a chance for survival once again. For the rays that animated the Guissot marker could come from only one thing in this lifeless ship—and that was the shining murderer that was battering at the defenses of his mind. There was no substance in the shining thing, only a warp of boundless energy. Energy could be negated by other energy; the principle of interference flashed through his thoughts, the knowledge that radiation could heterodyne radiations, and blank both out!

Devlin retreated to the innermost depths of his mind, abandoning the fight after the fashion of the Judo fighters of old Japan who gave way to an attacker, allowing him to spend his strength while they sought an advantage. He bent every effort of his will to forcing his weakened, paralyzed muscles to respond. Slowly, painfully slowly, he flogged his rigid body into taking a hesitant step. Moving as woodenly as had the animated corpse of McKay, he fought his way across the generator room, inch by ghastly inch, feeling himself being dispossessed, knowing that when the last contact with his mind was gone, he would die.

But each step took him nearer his goal, until he could almost touch it—the great, misshapen, bulbous crystalline tube of lambent energy that was the Guissot space-time convertor.

And he touched it!

The shining ghoul, flickering with a new pulsation, a glow of mingled hate and fear, beat at his mind with desperate, flailing force. With stiffened fingers that might have already belonged to a dead man, Devlin yanked over a switch and stumbled on past the convertor.

Chaos flared!

Gouts of greenish radiance leaped from the warped shape of the Guissot and stabbed deep into the shimmering haze. The shining thing vented a soundless mental shriek of agony as radiation encountered hostile radiation and battled to the death. Its dying convulsions flooded the room with terror-stricken mind-bellows of an Immortal facing annihilation. The thing bawled for help—and from afar Devlin thought he heard a response, as though some kin to the alien had heard its plea, and was flashing to the rescue.

But no help could arrive in time to save the energy creature from its doom. The struggle was over in an instant, and the shining thing, hopelessly outmatched by the streaming rays of the Guissot, simply ceased to be.

A despairing shriek that was not sound echoed for a moment in Devlin's exhausted brain. It was cut off in mid-cry as the creature flickered out of existence.

DEVLIN OPENED the switch of the Guissot, and its flaring radiations dimmed and disappeared. There was utter silence, and he was alone.

He braced himself against the huge, warm shape of the convertor, head bowed, while he sought to regain strength and volition. He was worn out, and filled with a great, weary despair. The expedition had been so gallant, the ships so brave—and all that was left was himself, and a single ravaged ship that could barely limp home. So much for Man's brave dream of the conquest of the stars, he thought . . . and yet he knew that the men might die, and the ships be lost, and yet the dream would go on.

His head jerked up galvanically. Again a sound, a whisper of motion from beyond the generator room's port. Was it the twice dead body of McKay, returned again to give vicious battle?

It was not. There was a flicker of colorless light that played around the port frame and was gone, as though a shimmer of heat lightning had peered in curiously and fled. Then the frame was filled with the blankly staring Golem body of Mike Harveson, stiff and tenanted by one of the shining ghouls, outlined with a rippling cloak of radiance.

This was the comrade to whom the shiny thing had appealed in its dying convulsions! Too late for aid it had arrived—but not too late for vengeance!

Devlin clutched the cold handle of the switch. "Stop!" he grated, mentally. "Stop!"

In his mind he felt the answer of the alien—mad, blinding rage, a vow to vengeance upon the presumptuous creature who had dared harm one of the shining things.

He stood firm. "Stop," he said again, and knew that the essential impact of his thought could reach the thing, although the words were lost upon a creature that was weft of shimmering force. "Stop," he repeated, and a tingling refusal crept into his mind.

He added: "Already I've destroyed one of you—we're not as defenseless as you thought, are we? Stop—or you die, too!"

The marionette that had been Mike Harveson halted, and a sense of doubt touched Devlin's thoughts from outside. He held himself tensed to throw the switch, yet hardly daring; afraid that the conflict of radiations which would destroy the shining thing housed in Harveson's body would wreak destruction upon Mike himself.

Invisible tendrils reached into his brain, and words seemed to from themselves within his mind. "I have your friend. Harm me and he dies also."

Confidence surged through Devlin in a heady stream. Better Harveson were destroyed, than be a puppet of the shiny thing! His thoughts rang out, firm, demanding.

"But you don't want to die! Release him, and go back!"

The words in Devlin's mind took on a different tone; they had about them now a wheedling note of entreaty. "Help us. We wish you no harm, Earthman. We only desired your bodies that we might free ourselves from this barren little world."

Devlin laughed. There was no mirth in the short, bitter sound. "You killed my friends; you would bring war and grief to my people, though we would destroy you all in the end. Leave us or die!"

The little fingers of alien thought were worms now, wriggling through all the nooks and crannies of Devlin's brain, and he raised the switch of the Guissot warningly. "All right!" he shouted. "You want to die—damn you, you *will* die!"

He clicked the first step of the switch, and the Guissot tube glowed malevolently. Devlin took a deep breath and tightened his grip upon the switch handle.

"Stop!" The panicky thought shrieked into his brain. "I yield!" There was a final flourish of radiance, and the alien was gone.

Mike Harveson's body lay motionless within the open airlock. Devlin slumped beside it, full of pain and bone-deep fatigue, waited until Harveson's chest lifted in a great, sobbing breath. He dragged him within the ship; then, head down and body bent, as though with extreme age, he turned toward the pilothouse and the long flight back to Earth.

* * * * *

SUPERSTITION SCOFFER

The late H. G. Wells, the man who could work miracles with words, showed his disdain for the number thirteen bane by having the "unlucky" numeral appear king-size outside his home.

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*... Out of the sky the Earthmen came to bring
disaster and chaos to the Golons of Ith...*

CAVERNS of ITH

BY BASIL WELLS



THE MANY-LEGGED LITTLE MONSTER POISED ON THE MOSSY LIMB and crinkled its warty purplish hide as it mindlessly combed its triple tails with delicate long toes. Rain sluiced down upon it but it continued to preen its hideousness.

No longer did the fist-sized thing his idle brain had fashioned amuse him. His mind dissolved it abruptly.

Ruld settled back into the arboreal cavern that a rotted limb had left in the massive trunk of the *yanal*. Even here, two hundred feet above the slimy rot of the jungle floor, the hollow trunk was large enough to contain his twelve-foot bulk.

For a long time it had been raining, how long he could not know but his stomachs were crying for food, both of them.

He studied the flaming red horizon. Overhead the black clouds blotted out the eternal red heavens, but to the south, toward the mysterious land of Char, he could see that warm sullen glow.

Then it was that he saw the dark little bird come sailing downward out of the southern flames. The wings of the bird were

burned away and flame yet spewed from its head. Ruld thought the poor creature must have flown too high and been trapped by the raging inferno above.

He watched the singed bird come plunging down. The heat had made it swell apparently for it grew and grew until it was larger than a *yanal* tree's trunk was thick. His huge round eyes closed and he shuddered. This must be a nightmare, he thought.

Yet when he opened them again the bird was grown larger and his huge cup-shaped ears picked up the swelling whine of sound as the atmosphere ground against the hurtling shape. Almost, he thought, his sunken nostrils could catch the foul scent of the bird's scorched flesh and feathers, for flame had not ceased to spout from its head and belly.

A momentary darkness came and went as the great bulk dropped roaring down past his *yanal* tree, and then there was a rending of wood and the hissing of water on overheated skin.

A terrible silence, broken only by the drumming thud of the

flooding rain, spread out across the Ithan jungle. Fleet-limbed *geths* huddled wetly together, their timid reptilean eyes glassy with terror, and the long-haired, squatty tree-beasts, who had been golons in a former evil life, squeaked and jabbered thinly.

Ruld quitted his dry shelter in the yanal's trunk and lowered himself along the network of lianas to the huge lower limbs. Before he had gone far his thick yellowish fur was drenched and his reddish-brown *buroid*, or pouched tunic, was sodden. Yet the golon went steadily onward toward the blackened leaves and jagged whiteness of snapped limbs that marked the fallen bird's resting place.

Out along the lower limbs he ran, for a thousand feet or more, his bare four-toed feet slipping not at all on the mossy broadness of that living road. Twice again he swung by lianas to other horizontal branches, and then he found himself looking down upon a four hundred foot long mound of steaming smooth rock—or was it metal?

This then was the bird, this tapering cylindrical thing without feathers or hair. And for a moment Ruld could not help wondering if perhaps this was not some strange bird that flew about a flaming tree in the blazing skies overhead.

He approached the dead thing silently, his eyes alert for a possible attack by a lizard man. The *surins* preferred the ground levels and a golon was never safe there. But he scented no danger and his ears heard no rasp of scaly hide as a surin's body must make as it moved.

The dead bird had no head, but where it should have been a mouth slowly opened. Ruld halted. He saw the miniature creatures, like golons but hairless, coming from the thing's open mouth. They looked like insects crawling and eating about the head of a dead lizard, he told himself.

One of the strange, hairless golons saw Ruld. He pointed at Ruld, using a short piece of smooth stick, and a fractional instant later Ruld felt his body stiffen helplessly. His flesh prickled and tingled as though a million thorn leaves were being rubbed across it.

A moment later he pitched forward on his face, his stricken, huge eyes watching the four strange golons who had come from the bird thing's mouth, approaching...

"RULD," SAID THE FEMALE GOLON NAMED ELNA THOMS, "YOU are a good pupil. You can talk Terran as good as any of us. And after only ten hours in the menta booth!"

"I would like to go back to my village," Ruld said. "My father is the... chief... king, there. He is very old. If I am not there when he dies Orn will be the leader."

Elna smiled. "Is being king so important?" she asked.

"It is a pain in my head," Ruld told her. "But the people must be led. And my brother, Orn, is a fool. He will be a tree-beast the next time."

"You think he would be a bad leader, Ruld?"

The golon nodded. "He would take other golons' mates. He would take Uva, she who is to be mine. It must not be."

"I'll talk to Garmon Andrus about you," the Earthling female said. She stood up, but half the Ithan's twelve feet in height. "I believe we can return with you to your village right away."

Ruld nodded. He liked this Terran female. Her head was covered with long fur that was the color of his own kind. Her eyes were tiny and had single eyelids but they were steady and honest. The one she called Garmon Andrus he liked also, but the two other, older, Terrans he feared. Men, they called themselves, men and women.

They spoke much in fables. They came from beyond the flames, they told the golon. As though there could be anything beyond

the flaming heavens! And their skies were blue instead of a warm red!

They said that a great flying mountain had plowed across the South Pole of their outer world, wherever that was, and ripped away the ice cap and the rock beneath. The ice cap, so their impossible fable went, was nothing but hard water—water that was like stone. And they said that their leaders had sent them in the great bird to learn what the flying mountain had done.

The one named Garmon Andrus had wanted to send a message back to his chiefs when they found a vast crater exposed leading into Ith, but the big man who was covered with reddish hair said no. He took something from the message sender and hid it. He said they would explore first.

Ruld wanted to laugh. These foolish ones believed that Ith was inside their own world, and that the inside of their world was in flames. They said the pleasant red light of the heavens was really nothing but lakes of melted rock. Probably they came from some unknown island beyond the Ruddy Sea and lost their wits when the wingless bird came too close to the skies above...

"We are ready to go, Ruld," the younger man said. Ruld started. He had not heard Garmon Andrus' approaching steps. "Will you guide us to your village?"

"Of course." He held up his harnessed long arms, the oddly transparent skins that bound them together glistening in the strange light of the bird's hollow series of bellies. "Must I wear these?"

Andrus twisted the little dial that secured the zippered bonds and stripped them from the golon's arms.

"I would not have bound you," he said, scowling and rubbing at his prominent nose with the back of his hairless hand, "but Cyn Smith is my superior and..."

"I will not escape," Ruld told him. "The village of Ruld, my father, is where I wish to go."

Cyn Smith came heavily into the strange, square belly of the bird and glowered at the freed golon.

"I gave you no authority," he began, "to free this—this beanpole Andrus."

"Ruld has proved that he is our friend," said Garmon Andrus levelly, his gray eyes glittering into the bigger man's greenish ones, "and I'll not see him treated as a prisoner any longer."

"Insubordination, Major," spluttered Cyn Smith. "As official observer for the Terran United Nations Government, I am in control of this party. I'll have you broken when we return."

"On what charges, Smith? That I treated a native of this inner planet humanely? That I tried to contact headquarters to report, but some *unknown* party or parties sabotaged the spacer's radio?"

Cyn Smith growled something unintelligible and left them. Garmon Andrus slipped into the straps of his pack, for this stomach of the dead bird was his, and he shared it with Ruld, and they pushed out toward the open mouth where the others waited.

RULD LED THE WAY ALONG THE GROUND. HIS PEOPLE ALWAYS used the safer upper ways where the lizard people seldom ventured, but the dwarfish Terrans could not be persuaded to follow. They trusted to their strange, silent weapons, parablats, they called them—the same paralyzing sticks that had frozen the golon in his tracks.

They had given Ruld his six foot, black needle thorn again, the natural sword that all Ithan warriors carry, and his bone knives and club had been restored to him. He was free again and heading back toward the arboreal village of his people. No ugly surin or crazed tree-beast had better attack him now!

"Our Earth jungles cannot compare with this," Elna told Garmon Andrus as they marched down the wide game trail. "Look at

height of those ferns, and the thickness of those lianas!"

"I don't wonder that the golons can live all their lives above ground. If I didn't have a parablaster, I'd be up there with the monkeys myself."

"Ruld," bellowed Cyn Smith, in his clumsy Ithan speech, "what is name of tree." He pointed at a yanal.

The golon told him. "All golon villages built in yanal trees are safe," he said. "The fire of Ando does not strike yanal wood. The breath of Ando cannot push them over."

"Ando is the god of Ith?" asked the fourth member of the party, an elderly, mild-voiced female Terran named Mera Brond. "Or this section of the inner planet?"

Before Ruld could translate his words into the Terran of Mera Brond the other woman spoke.

"Ando is their great god," she agreed. "This island continent is also called Ando because it is the chosen place of Ando."

Ruld hissed for silence and motioned them back into the dark undergrowth along the trail. He had heard the rasping of scaly hide on scaly hide. A party of surins were approaching!

The golon eased his long thorn out of its sheath at his back and freed the bone knives. If he were alone he could have swung up the liana ladders to safety, but he could not desert these pygmy golons from Terra.

They came shuffling along the trail's curving way, eleven of them, their ragged jaws agape and their dull scales dark red in the filtered light of the eternal day. And with them they carried two bloody, limp shapes—a half-grown geth and a golon!

At sight of the golon's broken body Ruld went berserk. He sprang out into the trail and bounded into the middle of them. Forgotten were the Terrans and their strange weapons. Here were the slayers of his own kind, creatures less than animals.

His thorn darted out twice, each time driving deep into the unshielded eye of a surin and so into its tiny brain. A third plunge of the six foot sliver of black needle, and then it was torn from his grip by the horrible jaws of the lizard brute. He unslung his club from his belt and lashed out at the armored snouts and necks of the surins without apparent success. They closed in.

Mighty jaws clamped down on his left arm. He rammed it deeper, jamming his naked elbow into the angle of the mighty jaw to block its complete closing. His club was gone and he drew his bone knife to dig with it at his attacker's eyes.

But the other surins were snapping and clawing at the golon's furry yellow body. Their toes gouged red furrows in his legs and sides and their teeth searched for his flailing limbs.

Ruld felt the stinging of the paralysis that had numbed his body once before. The surin's jaws relaxed, and he slipped helplessly downward. His dulled brain knew that he was bleeding, possibly dying, but with the fading of vision, he could yet see a knot of golons come racing down the trail toward them.

"Friends," he cried out. "Terrans and golons... friends!"

Then the red shadows of the jungle rolled in upon him, and he dreamed that he was drifting above the strange world of Elna and Garmon Andrus where light and darkness came and went in checkered moving shadows...

"RULD, RULD!" THE URGENCY OF THE CRY PUSHED AWAY THE shadows.

His great eyes slitted. It was Uva's beautiful face looking down at him. Uva's nostrils were lovely and hairless; she was the only girl in the village whose nose did not project a fractional distance from her rounded furry cheeks. And her ears were so huge and perfect—they did not hug the curve of her skull.

Her four breasts were firm and perfect beneath the triple burolds that covered her ripening lush body. By Ando! she would give

birth to many strong young golons! Nor would her young be forced to drink the bluish milk of the yanal nuts for food. Uva was strong and lovely.

"Ruld, you must escape. The red-haired golon with the stinging twig has helped Orn to be king. While you were sick your father died."

"What of the others, Uva? Did they turn on me, too?"

"The woman, the wrinkled, hairless one, yes. The others lie bound in Par's dwelling."

Ruld sat up. For a moment the rough laced sticks of the walls circled, but they soon steadied.

"We must rescue them," he said. "They will know how to overcome this Cyn Smith. Then my people will throw Orn to the lizards."

"They come to kill you, Ruld, soon! Run and hide in the jungle, beloved, until you are strong. Then you can rescue your friends and me."

"You? Orn is going to take you for his mate?" Ruld felt his blood thundering through his veins as he stood up. "Where are weapons?"

"There are no weapons, Ruld, except a short thorn that I carry hidden within my burold. But you are not strong enough to fight; so you will need nothing of the sort."

"Give me the thorn, Uva. We will free the Terrans and escape."

Uva dragged a short thorn dagger from her garments. It was but half the length of Ruld's forearm and slender. A poor weapon to turn against a warrior's sword thorn.

"Why am I not guarded?" Ruld demanded, as he went to the woven mat of lianas closing the hut's low entrance.

"Orn dared not overthrow you openly. He thinks you yet lie in the half-death, your other self far away beyond the land of Char."

Ruld flexed the almost useless left arm, his teeth clenched as the torn muscles cried out. His body was stiff and sore from the dozens of wounds where the lizard people's hard toes had scraped flesh away. Then he faced inward toward the main stem of the yanal tree.

His hut was built far out on a huge limb, two hundred feet above ground. Three branches split out from the main arm of the tree and supported its oval-based structure. It was built three hundred feet from the bole, and a dozen other huts lay between them and the hollow trunk where Uva said the red-haired Cyn Smith was quartered.

"The other Terrans are captives near Cyn Smith?"

"In the cursed hut of Eyeless Par," Uva said, shuddering.

Since the blind wizard of the aboreal village had died, no golon had ventured inside the mossy, mud-daubed walls. The other self of Par might yet be lingering there ready to crowd into a living golon body. For eyeless Par had been a mighty wizard.

"Orn does not enter the hut!" stated Ruld, flatly. "He is afraid of the squeaking tree beasts and the legless lizards."

"No," agreed Uva, "your brother does not go there. It is the ugly golon, the man, who feeds them."

"I have been there, Uva. Inside the dwelling of Par. There are no ghosts or unseen twins there. For I was not harmed. Go and free them while I follow."

Uva's soft yellow fur crackled with fear. The velvety, purplish double lids of her beautiful dark eyes blinked and her lovely noseless face contorted. But only for a moment. Then she smiled bravely.

"You entered through the door?"

Ruld shook his head. "I came down through the lianas to the roof. A section of the thatch is like a trapdoor. Near the needle thorn lashed at the rear of the peak to ward off winged surins."

The female golon laughed. "Only after drinking much of tum-

tun or a taste of the pod of the purple flowers do men see the winged ones."

"So it is with the dead; they are powerless to reach us. This I know. Now go with no fear to Par's hut. Help the Terrans to escape."

"You will be waiting—where?"

The golon bit his lip as he climbed, one-armed, up into the stout lacings of lianas that bound together the jungle. Much as he hated to send Uva alone on this rescue errand, he knew it was best.

"The hills of clear rock," he said, "that divide this jungle from that on the other end of the island. I will meet you there, beside the River of Sharp Stones."

RULD RESTED ON THE GIANT BRANCH THAT HUNG OUT OVER THE rushing tumult of the river. Looking down, he could see the shattered white, red, green and black boulders that gave the river its name. They were splintered and shattered, many of them, and sharp scraps of rock littered the shallow riverbed.

Uva had not returned from the hut of the dead wizard. But he did not expect her quite yet. The clumsy Terrans were more at home on the ground than in the trees. Of course, she might have been captured or the escape thwarted, but this Ruld doubted. He had great faith in the strength and cunning of his promised mate.

The golon studied the knife-edged stones that floored the river and its rocky shallows. He knew how they could slash through flesh and bone. And since he had no bone-knife, why not fashion one of this splintered stone?

From the Terrans he had learned that on their own island—he could not but think Earth was another island here on Ith—the natives had fashioned knives and throwing swords, spears and arrows they were called, using stone like this. They had suggested that his people might better protect themselves against the scaly surins with such weapons, but he had not believed them practical innovations.

So it was that he clumsily descended from the limb, along a branching tree-like liana, and was lashing one of the little pile of sharpened flint slivers to a stout stick, when Uva came to join him. And she was alone.

"They had escaped already," she said. "Their bonds lay on the floor, cut, and the trapdoor in the roof was open."

Ruld shook his head. "They will try to reach the wingless bird," he said, "and Cyn Smith will capture them. But we can do nothing now!"

"Perhaps when you are well again, Ruld."

Ruld laid the rude spear down and began making another. Uva saw that he had lashed the stone in place with strips of the bark cloth from his tunic and so she sacrificed one of her three burolds for the same purpose. She tore it into many stout strips.

"We will make six or seven such spears," Ruld told her as they worked, "before we start across the Crystal Mountains. Once safe from pursuit we can make other weapons."

"Never have I seen such ugly points as these possess." Uva frowned at the spear point she was lashing in place. "I shudder to think of such a point tearing into a living body."

"It would be more painful than a thorn's tip," agreed Ruld, "but no worse than a surin's teeth."

His eyes combed the towering jungle wall behind them and then climbed the redly glistening slopes of the strange hills before them. He saw the swift waterfalls, eight of them one behind the other in graceful frothing steps, that sliced down into the clear transparency of the rock. Spotted along the gorge's devious way, he saw scattered clumps of trees, but elsewhere the glassy walls were devoid of vegetation.

In the memory of no living golon had a warrior crossed the

barrier and lived to return to the northern jungle. Savage surins lived in caves high above the tallest jungle fronds, going down into the shadows of the trails to win their food. There were legends of huge living stones that rolled upon a venturesome golon to crush and devour him. And beyond the crystal mountains hostile tribes of golons waited.

Yet he must attempt the crossing now that his brother was aware of his danger. Orn would have the hunting tree beasts, the sacred tree beasts from the temple of Ando perched high above the village, on his trail. Once they came up with him there would be no pretense of brotherly love or friendship on Orn's part. He had gone too far in his plotting to allow Ruld to live...

Ruld spang to his feet from where he crouched over his third spear. He faced back toward the soaring dark loom of jungle.

"I scent danger," he said, his flat nostrils quivering. "The tree beasts of the temple must have trailed you here! Quick! We must reach the rocks where they dare not follow."

Uva smiled her quick comprehension, her smooth-furred face beautiful and her lovely huge ears twitching gracefully. She but awaited his desire in the direction their flight should take.

Ruld smothered the quickening sense of panic in his great chest as he saw the serene trust in her huge limpid eyes. He could not let her know that his strength was almost gone, and his legs felt like wavering leaves before a ravening tempest. He forced his legs to carry him proudly forward up along the river's rocky brink.

It was a poor trail that paralleled the first waterfall. As they climbed the spray-lashed way their bare feet slipped often. They reached the height of ten golons above the reddish twilight of the jungle shadows before Ruld knew that he could go no further. He staggered away from the cascade's mist along the narrow ledge they had reached, and dropped exhausted in the shadow of an overhanging tablet of stained glassy rock.

"Go on, Uva," he gasped. "Escape up the trail. The tree beasts are not yet in sight and they cannot follow your scent through the falling water."

Uva pillowed his feverish head in her warm lap and rubbed his great ears lovingly. She put her capable, four-fingered hand over his mouth.

"By the ears of Ando," she said, "I think you have indeed lost your twin self! What foolishness you talk. I will not leave you here."

Ruld saw that the rocks sheltered them. Translucent they were, rather than clear like the watery pools that gather in hollows of the jungle giants' horizontal branches. Perhaps they could lie hidden until the tree beasts and their golon masters, the priests, were gone.

"Beloved," called Uva, "I see two who come running. Two small golons—wearing strange garments—your friends!"

Ruld found the strength to lift himself to his knees and look down into the valley where the river fumed and beat itself into frothy pinkness on the jumbled boulders. It was, indeed, the two Terrans, the two younger golons from Earth, who stumbled at a weary run from the jungle depths toward the thundering waterfall.

"Signal to them, Uva," he begged. "Throw a bit of rock or a spear. Only they can overcome Cyn Smith. And until Cyn Smith is helpless, Orn will be chief of my villages."

Uva shouted and sent stones skating and bumping down the precipitous slope. The two looked up and stopped. They started to turn. They were returning to the gloomy rot and slimy waiting death of the jungle depths. To them Uva was another enemy, in a hideous, flame-shot world of enemies.

Ruld pulled himself upright.

"Gar Andrus!" he cried. "It is Ruld!"

The man spun about and turned the girl with him. He started

up along the wicked natural steps of the trail toward them, half-dragging the woman's exhausted body.

And then, from the trail they had just quitted, sprang a pack of squatty, gray-haired tree beasts, their slavering yellowed fangs bared and their upthrust narrow ears probing forward like an insect's antennae!

THE TERRANS WERE THORNED INTO GREATER ACTIVITY BY THIS visible danger. They scrambled up along the slippery shelves and rough projections that made the sheer trail passable. With the last of their jaded strength they gained the shelf where Uva and Ruld waited, and sagged at last in the poor shelter of the glassy slabs.

The tree beasts raced to the base of the rocky slope, their sensitive nostrils picking up the warm spoor of the two they followed. But so weak is the power of their hideous red-rimmed eyes that none of them had witnessed the upward climb of Garmon Andrus and Elna Thoms. They milled excitedly at the spray-lashed end of the scent, their squatty legs and long arms jolting them around like grotesque parodies of golons.

Only then did the double-striped, black tuniced priests of Ando come dropping down out of the lianas and lower branches of the jungle's rim. One after another they came until Ruld counted twenty of the golons with the twin white stripes around their middle.

All the priests of the four villages were here! He had known that they favored his brother's bid for the leadership of the people because of his championing their demands for more servants. And Ruld's clearly expressed distrust in the purity of their motives in demanding ever-greater gifts of food and cloth had not been too welcome.

So now he faced the fraction of warriors supporting his brother, the priests of Ando, and the terrible paralyzing weapons of Cyn Smith. And for weapons he had five spears, some sharp stones, a short dagger thorn. He was wounded and almost helpless and the Terran, Garmon Andrus was in much the same case.

More golon warriors came out of the forest. He saw Orn and several of his one-time friends. Among the warriors came stupid Ruadag, the giant golon who could hunt for game. His brain was like that of a tree beast. And upon Ruadag's back, in a strange pouch of leather and bark cloth, rode the red-whiskered pygmy Terran, Cyn Smith.

"Why does Cyn Smith aid my brother?" demanded Ruld.

Elna Thoms smiled wanly up at the golon. "He is afflicted with the same disease that plagues your brother. He is ambitious. Since kings and dictators have been outlawed on Earth for many years he has found a new world—his for the taming."

"That's right, Ruld. He's playing Orn along until he can sieze control. Then he'll conquer all of the several hundred islands of Ith. Be emperor of a world!"

"That is not good," Ruld said. He watched the assembled golons approaching the waterfall. "Never have the golons tried to capture the hunting lands of other villages. There is room for all."

"There won't be," prophesied Garmon Andrus hoarsely. "There'll be factories and machines where your people will be driven to work. And Cyn Smith will bring men, outlaws perhaps, to rule over you."

"I have two enemies, then. And Cyn Smith is the greater of the pair. He must be crushed."

"With what?" demanded the Terran. "Looks to me as though we're sunk right now. They're starting to climb."

The tree beasts snarled and shrieked in their uncannily golon-like way as they were driven up the trail. Uva smiled placidly as she lined a score or more of the rock slabs and jagged fragments

before her on the ledge. Her unworried expression heartened Ruld and he found strength returning to his sore body as he readied his spears.

When they were within two golons' length of the ledge, Uva and Ruld stood up and began to cast their missiles among the confused, yelping brutes. They slipped backward, bearing with them their fellows and the golons crowding up from below. In a brief moment of bestial screeching and curdling death cries the path was swept clear.

Ruld grinned at the Earthling. For the moment they had won, but they both knew that eventually the superior number of the enemy would swing the final victory against them. Their only safety lay in resuming their flight.

"I'm up to it if you are," Garmon Andrus told him. "The higher we climb the better."

"Gar Andrus, you're a fool!" cried Elna Thoms. "Don't you see that Cyn Smith has equipped the golons with bows and arrows?"

As though to emphasize the words of the woman a scattered hail of quartz-tipped arrows began to thud about them. They hugged closer to the sheltering rocky slabs.

Uva cried out once and Ruld thought that she had been wounded, but when he turned back to look at her she was busily engaged in chipping away rotten chunks of the glassy slope with an axe-like stone slab. She smiled up at his questioning glance.

"There's an opening below us," she said, "that might shelter us all if I can clear a hole through to it. One golon could guard the entrance."

"Keep watch," Ruld admonished the Terrans, "for their next attack. I will help Uva."

The vigorous assault on the brittle rock ripped away great knife-edged shards. The narrow crevice widened until Uva could reach her arm far back into the milky translucence of the crystalline slope.

"It widens!" she cried. "There must be a cavern beyond."

After that they hacked frenziedly at the rocky wall until the opening was large enough to squeeze through. The two Earthlings went first and then Uva. Ruld took a last glance back over the sheltering rock slabs and saw that the golons and the tree beasts were charging for the lower end of the path again. And the arrows were flying so thickly that it was suicidal to expose himself by throwing more rocks down upon them.

The golon wriggled through the widened crevice after his companions until he could stand erect. He found they were standing in the lighted juncture of six narrow passages leading off into the softly glowing crystalline depths of the hillside. Here they could stand off any number of attackers for the narrowness of the entrance precluded any concerted rush of warriors.

Ruld's spear met the first golon's headlong attack by piercing his throat. Using the spear, he dragged the dead warrior closer and stripped him of his twin knives and his needle thorn. Garmon Andrus took the big, ten-foot bow for his weapon.

The next golon carried a rocky slab as a shield. The arrow of Andrus, and Ruld's needle sword found the exposed flesh the stone did not cover, and they had added another sword and bow to their meager armament.

After that no other warrior plunged recklessly through the opening, but Ruld could hear them talking angrily on the outer ledge. Then he heard Cyn Smith's deep, harsh voice and also that of Orn. Garmon Andrus tugged at his good arm.

"We must take to the other passages," he whispered. "Cyn Smith has the parablaster. He will send a blast of neuro-neutralizing power into the opening soon."

Ruld knew that the Earthling was right. Reluctantly he follow-

ed him toward the passage, second from the left hand wall, that he had chosen as the widest and best-lighted. Ten paces he took and then the terrible, stinging, prickling rays of the parablaster again shook him.

He went down on his face, his stricken eyes aware that his three companions had shared his fate. And from the distance he heard a triumphant chuckle in the throat of Cyn Smith...

SLOWLY FEELING AND WARMTH RETURNED TO HIS STRICKEN LIMBS. His ears tingled with returning life and he came slowly to his knees. Uva lay close to him, unmoving, and he rubbed the smooth roundness of her cheeks and broad, sunken nostrils with gentle fingers. Her huge eyes opened slowly, the purple lids quivering with pain, and Ruld leaned over to bite the tip of either ear.

This caress aroused the female golon and she returned the loving bites of Ruld until his ears tingled.

"They must have taken another passageway," Ruld said, answering her unspoken question.

"But the tree beasts—they could trail us by our scent spoor," objected Uva.

Ruld turned back toward the junction of the six tunnels, his great, round ears extended. Only the groans of wounded and dying golons came to him. He took a silent step back to the tunnel mouth, and there his eyes widened at the carnage.

A dozen golons lay, ripped and bloody, upon the little cave's smooth floor, and with them sprawled the hideous scaly bodies of three surins. Apparently this underground world of lighted passages and caves was inhabited by the lizard people and a party of them had come upon the yellow-furred invaders even as they were closing in to finish Ruld's party.

Why Cyn Smith's parablaster had not halted them Ruld never knew, but Garmon Andrus told him that the weapon's batteries may have been exhausted of solar energy.

The golon went to the Terrans and helped them to stand. Then he pushed them along the tunnel.

"We must escape from this place," he said. "Soon the surins will return to carry away the dead for food. They will search for any who may have crawled away."

"I hope the surins have finished off Smith and your brother," Elna told him warmly. "Once we have returned to Earth there will be no danger of any other man exploiting Ith. We will protect it."

Ruld did not look back. He was leading the way.

"It would be better," he said, "that your people never learned of our island. We are happy living as we do in the jungle. We do not need machines, or flying ships, or stinging weapons such as you possess."

"But the policy of TUNG is to protect the native cultures of other worlds," argued the girl. "Even the tourists would be forbidden to do more than cruise above your lovely jungles to study your tree villages."

Ruld saw that the passage was broadening and the smooth rush of an unseen stream was growing louder. They were approaching a cavern, and a cavern could mean lizard people or other unknown monsters.

"We do not want more wingless birds flying over Ith," he told the Terrans bluntly. "Would you like it if golons came to watch you when you ate or washed the fur on your head?"

Elna laughed merrily. "Of course not, Ruld. But the Terran United Nations Government will convince you of your error."

"Even if their flying tungs have to drop dynamite on your homes to clinch the argument," agreed Garmon Andrus dryly.

Ruld stopped, gesturing for silence. He stood at the top of an

inclined plane of the slippery crystal rock looking down into a peaceful valley where trees grew and a stream circled between low grassy banks. The familiar warm red glow of the Ithan heavens was banished by the milky, semi-transparency of the cavern roof. The light was pale and sickly-looking. Ruld was revolted.

"For the first time, Gar," the Terran woman said softly, "you look human. I thought we'd all turned into Indians."

Andrus laughed softly in reply. "It seems good to be out of that eternal fiery glow," he whispered in agreement. "See the green of the vegetation! And the water no longer resembles blood."

"Is your land like this ghastly cavern?" Ruld demanded.

The Earthlings nodded. "This is the way our world looks."

"I do not wonder then that you are so small and puny," he murmured. "It is marvelous that you ever grow to manhood in so dismal an atmosphere."

"To us," said Garmon Andrus, "it is a miracle that life of any sort exists within Earth's crust. Scientists have always maintained that the earth's core was a fluid mass of iron and silicon."

Uva touched Ruld's arm. "I think we should go to the trees and hide," she suggested. "There the surins cannot find us."

Ruld roughed the fur of Uva's long, slender neck. "Good," he agreed. "We need rest and food." He nodded to Andrus. "Later we will talk more about your mad land of pale light."

They went down the sloping cave floor to where the clumps of trees rooted at the stream's sandy brink. Here they found a comfortable crotch a few feet above ground and made there a nest of vines and woven sticks...

HOW LONG THEY SLEPT WAS, OF COURSE, IMPOSSIBLE TO KNOW. Cyn Smith had taken the time tellers from the wrists of the two Earthlings, and the light from the molten inner crust of Ith's heavens was as brilliant as when they fell asleep.

Ruld awakened to see three tree beasts jabbering at them. They were small, and their hairy coats were almost dazzling in their whiteness. Ruld had never before seen colors untinted by the all-pervading reddish glow of the sky.

He understood a few of the simple words that the tree beasts banded back and forth, and as he listened he forced his stiff body into life to arouse the others.

"Uva, Gar Andrus, Elna!" he called, as he shook them. "The tree beasts have betrayed us. They carry word of our presence here in exchange for sweets."

"I refuse to stir," groaned Garmon Andrus, bitterly. "They can come and get me."

"Gar, you brute!" the girl cried out. "You've been lying on my arm and it's asleep."

Elna's cry brought Andrus to his feet with an apology. Ruld and Uva were already scanning the narrow paleness of the landscape for any sign of the lizard people the tree beasts had gone to warn.

"Kill those tree beasts," Ruld told Andrus tersely, "with your arrows, or they will tell where we have gone. I'll use a spear for one—the two others are yours."

The Earthman readied three arrows and bent his bow. He looked over at Ruld. The spear drove upward, pierced a tree beast's middle, and at the same instant an arrow transfixing a second hairy brute. The last tree beast screamed like a frightened female golon, and turned on the limb to go swinging away.

His bid to escape was late. Andrus' arrow drove into his protruding white-haired belly, and he sprang far out into the void above the cavern river.

"Come," said Ruld. "We will follow the trees up along the water. Our goal lies in that direction."

He started out through the interlacing branches that roofed-over the stream, chafing at the slowness of their progress. The Terrans were very clumsy at learning how to follow the safe, wide trails of the liana-fenced branches. Even with his one good arm, he could travel more easily than on the ground.

Of course the soft artificial feet that the man and woman wore over their own five-toed feet might have been responsible for their ineptness, or perhaps it was the fact that, despite their five fingers, they had but one thumb on each hand. Ruld studied his own strong hands, admiring the utility and precision of his apposed twin thumbs and two long fingers, while he waited for them to catch up.

When they had gone perhaps a mile, Ruld hissed for silence. They had reached the end of the thin line of forest and the cavern walls pinched together into a channel barely wide enough for the stream. And here, from a side entrance, a party of surins came shuffling along, their great horny tails dragging and their scaly bodies rustling!

Ahead of them skipped two chattering, eager tree beasts. They were leading these twelve club-carrying lizard men to the sleeping place of the strangers in their cavern.

When they had gone, Ruld led the way to the opposite side of the stream. Here, too, a slit in the translucent rock permitted a small brook to come spilling out into the river. And water was the only way to cover their scent spoor...

The brook wound and twisted steadily upward into the heights of the inner peaks of the Crystal Mountains. The cliffs were honeycombs of caverns and winding passages. At times sections of the rock were clear as clean water and they could see huge caverns where trees and grass grew lushly along the underground course of the stream. Beneath their feet, or over their heads, they could see the bubble-like cavities that marked other caves.

Once they looked directly into the startled eyes of two lizard men, who faced them through a narrow, star-shaped section of glass-like rock. Ruld estimated that less than the length of his bone knife's handle separated them.

The surins snarled savagely at them, and grimaced soundlessly, before they went scuttling away into the invisibility beyond.

Twice they fell asleep in grassy caverns that the brook watered, their stomachs well-filled with fruit and the flesh of the blue-scaled fish lurking in the pools.

So it was that they came at last to the upper air, where a barren peak spilled water into a small lake and overflowed into the hungry crevices of the underground world, and Ruld saw again the welcome radiance of the flame-shot dome above.

They had reached the crest of the Crystal Mountains. On either hand the glistening ridges and cliffs of the hills fell away until they ended in the dark fringes of jungle. Ruld saw that the island was almost oval in shape, its heart banded by the glassy barrier upon which they now stood. And on all sides of the huge island there were the dark masses of other islands, most of them much smaller than Ando.

Far to the south, a mere dark line against the Ruddy Sea's restlessness, was the land of Char. It was to Char and beyond that the priests of Ando said the sleeping twin of all golons flew, and found strange and lusty adventure.

"Wonderful view," said Garmon Andrus. He pulled the ragged jacket closer about him. "Cold as an airlock in space up here, though."

Ruld shivered and agreed. Even his sleek coat of yellow fur could not blunt this strange shivering sensation. He understood now why the Terrans wore sleeved garments. Their homeland

must be as cheerless and cold as this mountain slope. They were accustomed to living in what they called space—in an airlock!

"We'd better hunt cover, Gar!" suddenly cried Elna Thoms' terrified voice. "Cyrn Smith must have assembled the oxy mixer and is hunting for us."

"Right you are," agreed Garmon Andrus, as the quartet dropped back down into the slotted crevice that swallowed the brook they had been following. "The rusty-haired old space wart's got the helicopter working! Didn't think he studied anything but politics."

"Mera Brond did, Gar. She was a second pilot on a stratosphere liner before she went into politics."

"That's just my luck," snorted the young Terran. "Out of all the government observers TUNG could send, I get an ex-pilot and a would-be Hitler. Nice rocketing, Elna."

Elna smiled at Garmon. Ruld winked his eye at Uva and twitched his left ear snappily. At times these Terrans were almost like golons. They fell in love and the males were as stupid about knowing what had happened to them as any golon.

The strange throbbing bird, the oxy mixer as Elna called it, bored back and forth across the ascending steps of glassy ridges and broken peaks. Inside, Ruld knew, Cyrn Smith and probably the gray-haired, bony woman from Earth were seated. They were searching for the fugitives, hoping to cut them off before they had escaped across the barrier.

The oxy mixer worked past their hiding place and beyond. Ruld felt his tense muscles relaxing, and he saw the others smiling with relief. They all began talking at once.

Too late, he heard the rasp of scaly hide and tried to draw his needle thorn. A coarse net dropped over them, and then another. Out of the tunnel behind them a party of surins had crept to attack, while they listened to the passing of the helicopter...

OUTSIDE THE LATTICED WINDOW OF THEIR PRISON CELL, A SHALLOW cave in the side of the larger cave to which they had been driven, Ruld could see the green leaves and snaky lianas of jungle growth. This cavern, like the others they had seen, was devoid of vegetation save along the streams threading through them. Here the surins lived, and when they tired of eating one another, or of the fish of the many underground pools, they were accustomed to go hunting for tastier game in the jungles at the base of the Crystal Mountains.

Golons and herbivorous saurians, *geths* in the Ithan tongue, were their chosen prey. And here were four golons, Ruld heard the hissing lizard brutes telling one another, ready for a great feast. When they had captured or killed two more geths, or even two more members of some hostile surin cavern's inhabitants, the mating of the queen with her newest male consort would be fittingly celebrated.

"Any chance to escape, Ruld?" demanded the Earthman.

"We have not yet become tree beasts," Ruld grunted. "But these bonds are too strong. My muscles cannot stretch them."

"Then you can see no hope?? By tree beasts, you mean—we will be eaten and our souls pass on into those of apes?"

Ruld caught the amused expression on the Terran's face as he spoke about the transfer of a wicked golon's other twin into a tree beast's ugly body. He sat straighter against the post to which his seated body was lashed. Garmon Andrus was an ignorant heathen.

"I meant," he explained, "that we would not whimper and scream about our fate as do the tree beasts."

"I am weary of idle talk," Uva broke in upon them. "Why do we not contrive some of the little things that live for amusement? Then I could forget my bound arms and legs."

"Very well," agreed Ruld. He grinned at the puzzled Terrans. "It is a favorite sport among we Ithans when the rain keeps us penned within our huts. Each of us controls our own creatures."

Ruld regarded the center of the narrow cave intently. A small purple bubble appeared there, and swelled until it was the size of the golon's clenched fist. As it ceased its growth a score of triple-jointed legs, each chela-tipped, sprouted, and from its center a snaky, reptilian head budded, the miniature teeth clicking savagely.

Beside him, Uva was staring at the wall of the cave's crudely constructed outer barrier. From the latticework of poles and daubed river slime a winged golon-like shape detached itself and swooped down toward the purple *thing*.

"Is it real?" demanded Garmon Andrus.

Ruld sent the tiny monster scuttling over toward the Earthling. It clawed its way up the Terran's bound legs and sank its miniature teeth into a flap of tattered material dangling from his jacket. The teeth clipped the flap off neatly. Then Ruld caused the little ball of life to come to him.

"It is actually material, concrete, living!" Elna gasped out her amazement. "Your minds fashion living matter out of nothing, and can control its actions! And yet we lie here bound and helpless."

The winged shape came down and posed gracefully on the girl's head. Elna kept her head rigidly upright so that the tiny elfin thing would not be frightened off.

"Why do you not use your creatures to help us escape, Ruld? Have them use their teeth, or those ugly looking pincers."

Ruld frowned doubtfully. "But we have never used our creations for anything but amusement. I don't know."

"Try it, Ruld," said Garmon Andrus, impatiently. "It's a chance for life. Your purple nightmare chewed my jacket off, so I don't see why it should stop at a strip of rawhide."

The golon hesitantly sent the little ball of pseudo-life back to the bound Terran's legs. He set it to industriously chewing at the tough strands. The thing of many-legs had razor-like teeth.

A moment later Garmon Andrus was free and he began slashing at their bonds with a sharp-edged splinter of bone that he found half-buried in the trodden yellowish clay near the entrance to the cave.

"You have a marvelous weapon in that mental creation of yours, Ruld," he told the golon, as they prepared to leave through the triangular window's lattice. "If it were bigger we could use it to terrify the surin and even your own people."

"I would never use many-legs against my own kind," Ruld said, appalled at the thought, "but against the surins, yes."

Under his intent gaze the purple *thing* expanded into a giant ball of hideous life more than five feet in diameter. Its chelae clicked together angrily and its jaws gaped wickedly wider. Elna and Uva shrank back from the ugly mass of brainless life.

Ruld helped the others to climb through the window. There were no guards posted before their crude prison, but all along the ledge they saw other cave entrances with young surin and basking female lizards before them. With any kind of luck they could be across the intervening twenty-foot strip of rock and safe in the leafy covert of the trees.

One after the other, Uva leading and the two Earthlings following, they took to the arboreal pathway, but before Ruld could swing upward a young surin's eye caught sight of him. Instantly the whole ledge was seething with activity, and from the caves and the valley floor of the cavern lizard warriors came racing.

The golon grinned. From the window bounced many-legs. As it headed toward the approaching surins it grew and grew until it was thicker than a golon was long. Its mighty chela-tipped

legs swept from side to side and the lizard people's advance was turned into a screeching terror-stricken rout.

Ruld swung across a limbless void on a stout vine to rejoin the others.

"They will not follow now," he said. "The many-legs will sit upon the ledge until it vanishes. This time I will not make it melt into emptiness."

"It will stay there?" demanded Elna incredulously.

"For a short time," nodded Ruld. "Perhaps as long as a golon takes to eat one fist of meat."

Garmon Andrus clapped Ruld on the shoulder, a difficult feat had not the golon been standing on a limb six feet below the Terran.

"We'll need no weapons to overthrow Cyn Smith and your brother," he said confidently. "Once we have reached your village again one of the monsters will terrorize the rebel priests and warriors."

Ruld shook his head. "No, my friend. My people also have this power. Against my lone many-legs they could send many bands of similar creatures."

Garmon Andrus swore bitterly. At every turn they were checkmated it seemed. Of only one thing could they be certain—that the surins would flee from the mental monster's grotesque deadliness.

THE LONG ROAD BACK TO THE JUNGLE, ALONG THE UNDERGROUND passages and through the well-lighted crystal caves, must have consumed many sleeping periods. Ruld lost count after they had slept for two hands, but he knew that there were more than eight rest periods.

His wounded arm was well again and his strength had returned. Although they had failed to emerge from the interlinking maze of softly-lighted corridors, they had found food in plenty. The countless little groves along the streams, and the miniature lakes as well, yielded plenty of game and fish. A golon might live out his life here, in this pale, changeless underworld.

But Ruld grew short-tempered and sullen as they wandered endlessly onward. He wanted to feel the hammering pulse of the torrential rains on the crust of Ith. He wanted to see the bloody brazen dome of the sky-roof that the great-eared one, Ando, had built above Ith's scattered islands. And above all he wanted to swing for miles, unchecked, along the mossy, liana-walled paths of the jungle's upper levels.

So it was that he cried out with joy as the first glimmer of the flaming skies was visible, and went racing ahead of the others.

He emerged on a low cliff's brow, a hundred feet above the jungle's steaming, dank floor, and stood for a moment sucking in great gasping breaths of the moist, thick air. He saw the overhanging, mighty limbs of a yanal above him, and the tempting, thick lianas looping down from them. He sprang out and upward.

For perhaps a mile he sped along the upper jungle ways, feeling the rough bark and smooth limbs with an exultant sensation of something precious being in his grasp again. Like a tree beast, he swung from branch to branch, and like a tree beast, too, was his thoughtless, heady flight into the tangled wilderness.

He stopped abruptly when memory regained control. He had deserted his mate and the two dwarfish golons from Earth! Even now they might be attacked by hostile golons or a horde of hungry surins! And they were without weapons, save for a crudely fashioned spear each and a sharp sliver of the crystalline glass.

Ruld raced back the way he had come. Like a thrown thorn sword, he knifed through the branches and vines toward the barrier. And as he swung along his awakening brain informed him that they faced even greater danger. For they had not passed the

Crystal Mountains, after all.

This was the southern peninsula of the island—the same broad jungle that they had escaped!

He was too late. Even as he emerged from the darkness of the upper terraces into the greater light of the treeless crystal slopes, he saw a column of golons entering the forest below him. And in the heart of their marching ranks, there moved two shorter, hairless ones.

Cyrn Smith and his brother had recaptured his friends and Uva. Now the defeat of the ambitious Earthman and the downfall of his brother's priest-sponsored regime depended entirely upon him. And if he did not succeed all Ith would be conquered and enslaved by Cyrn Smith...

RULD FOLLOWED THE MARCHING WARRIORS THROUGH THE JUNGLE. He saw them drive off a dozen surins with carefully spaced arrows. Everything the warriors did was military in its smartness. The ambitious Earthman was building an invincible, well-trained army of the peace-loving golons. Once he had forced the other golons to build machines, and factories for the machines, he would arm his giant subjects with more efficient tools of death—gunpowder, dynamite, and barablasts!

They came at last to where a low hill, not far from the tree village where Ruld was born, pushed itself a hundred feet into the humid, warm air. And here Cyrn Smith had put the golons, young and old alike, at work clearing away the age-old forest giants and building a mighty outer wall of earth, rocks, and logs.

The crude buildings of Cyrn Smith's world capitol were already rearing their ugly square walls of wood and stone from the hill's flat crest. From this rough beginning a world-conquering race of slaves was to come into being.

Ruld could not go beyond the great gate into the treeless, muddy wasteland within. Yet his need to know what was happening to the captives urged him to take the plunge. As he racked his brain for some solution to his problem the memory of the escape from the cavern surins came to him. Garmon Andrus had said his many-legs was a marvelous weapon.

The golon sent his many-legs sliding down the inside of the wall. Many-legs was small now, small as Ruld's fingertip, but its eyes were sharp to see its surroundings and its tiny ears were open. It was like an extension of the golon's own body—a second pair of eyes and ears.

"By the ears of Ando," grunted a muscular golon, as he carried a huge block of grayish stone up the hill, "I swear that I will escape into the jungle soon. This is no life for a free golon—a hunter."

"I am with you," a second golon at his side agreed, "but speak softly. Orn and the ugly dwarf have spies among our number."

"If Orn and the little tree beast, Cyrn Smith, were dead, we could go back to our huts in the yanal tree again," the first golon said bitterly. "But we are without weapons or a leader."

"Some day," the other man told him, "Ruld will come back. They have captured Uva and the two friendly pygmy golons, but Ruld escaped. When he comes back we will go free."

Ruld sent the many-legs scampering along faster. It was good news that he heard. His people were ready to help him. He did not doubt but what rebellion burned in many a stout golon's huge heart. With such an army to back him, he might yet wrest the kingship from Orn. But until Cyrn Smith was defeated or dead, any such victory would be worse than useless.

Many-legs raced tirelessly among the building walls of the jungle city. Into empty rooms it raced, and it dodged among the legs of the golons who crowded the inhabited sections. Finally it

came to the underground cell in the building's basement where the three captives were quartered.

"Cyrn is going back to Earth?" questioned Garmon Andrus.

Only then did the many-legs see that a fourth person was in the stone-walled dungeon—the gray-haired bony woman called Mera Brond.

"That is right," came Mera Brond's clipped, short answer. "He will recruit scientists and engineers from the space pirates, and from the cities of Mars and Venus."

"But, Mera," cried Elna Thoms, desperately, "don't you see what a terrible mistake he is making? You want to share his power and glory when he is ruling all of Ith. But you will never live to see that day."

"And why not?" demanded the older woman proudly. "Look what we have already accomplished with these primitive half-men!"

"Because they are primitives, Mera. The instant a handful of space pirates set foot on Ith, Cyrn Smith and you will both be through. The outlaws will rule Ith. And you will die."

"I—we never thought of that," faltered the woman, uncertainly. Suddenly she turned and went racing down the corridor to the ascending stone steps.

"Maybe she'll be able to stop him," Garmon Andrus said. "Otherwise, Ith is going to be a happy hunting ground for all the outlaws of three planets."

Ruld chose this moment to let the tiny monster drop to the dank floor among them and grow rapidly larger. The many-legs could not talk but it began ripping a great hole in the stone blocks that walled the cell.

"Ruld has sent it," Uva cried. Then her eyes steadied and a moment later a grotesque, bony-plated thing with razor-sharp forepaws gouged into the rich black loam beside Ruld's many-legs.

Satisfied that the trio could burrow out of the cell, or, if discovered, turn the tables on their captors by using Uva's pseudo-monster, Ruld swung off toward the space ship where Cyrn Smith was preparing to take off for the outer crust.

As he arrived, a helicopter dropped swiftly down, squarely in front of the great bird's airlock and the elderly female Terran sprang out. The golon saw her enter the airlock, and then, a long moment later, he saw his brother, Orn, creep on hands and knees from the same lock. Behind him Orn was dragging the limp body of the woman.

Cyrn Smith followed. His huge, square face seemed too large for his dwarfish human body, thought Ruld. He was angry. His red sprouting of chin whiskers were quivering, and the gleam in his eyes made Ruld's stomach tighten. The Terran was a mad creature—insane! His little taste of power over the golons of Ith had unbalanced his imperfect brain's functioning.

"Throw her in the cell with the others, Orn," he bellowed. "I'll attend to them when I come back."

Orn nodded his understanding. Ruld could see the growing bruise on the cheek of the unconscious woman where Cyrn Smith had struck her. Then his brother motioned for two of the group of twenty warriors to carry her.

"I will bring many guns, many weapons, many machines," Cyrn Smith roared on. "We will rule all Ith—all earth... the planets."

The mad Earthman cackled with glee and swung shut the space-lock. Orn issued hasty orders to his golons as the rocket jets of the wingless bird muttered into roaring life. And the sudden rain of Ith spilled abruptly down upon the ragged clearing to whip the tiny pools of water into lakes.

The spacer lurched forward and up. At the last moment Ruld sent a blob of the moving, yet lifeless, substance of his mental creation to sprout on the transparent blister of the control

room. It slipped and spread itself to cling to the glassy smoothness of the surface.

Ruld could sense, imperfectly at best, that the face of the Earthling was beneath him. And the man saw the expanding bubble of purplish life. The slack-jawed terror on his face showed that.

The golon made yet more hideous the eyes and huge teeth of his pseudo creature. The man stumbled out of his padded seat and backed in terror away from the expanding thing that seemed to blot out the heavens.

It was then that distance blocked out Ruld's control over the last many-legs. Instead he now watched the spacer from the tree where he crouched. And saw it bore straight upward until it contacted the distant red dome of the heavens.

There was a momentary flare of intense flame and then the spacer's stout frame and welded plates of instel alloy were blended forever with the molten sea of fluid elements that gave Ith its eternal daylight.

Whether the brain of the Terran had been incapable of directing the speeding spacer, or whether Ruld's monstrous creature had deflected the Earthman's course they were never to know. But Cynr Smith had never piloted a space ship before, and his experience with strosships of the upper atmosphere had been very meager.

Whatever the cause of his destruction Cynr Smith was gone.

Ruld was conscious of movement at his back and above him. He turned, cursing his preoccupation with the Spacer, to look into the grim faces of a dozen golons. One by one he recognized them—all members of his home village.

"Gank, Rudopo, Melk, Varro!—what are you doing? Come to capture me?"

Melk's badly tattered ears signed the negative. The others made the same motion.

"You are our leader," Gank said bluntly. "Your brother is as a tree beast. Because you were hunted we too are hunted. We would help you overcome the little red-haired golon and Orn."

The golon felt new hope burning in his ears. Now that Cynr Smith was gone his brother could no longer count on his knowledge of Earthly weapons.

"Give me a thorn," he said huskily, "and we will attack them now."

After that it was a bloody cruel battle between the two parties of golons. Ruld's golons had evened their numbers with a hail of arrows from ambush before they sprang upon the soldiers of Orn.

Bone knives and needle thorns stabbed and thrust. Golons died with their foes' teeth buried in their necks. Even the tree beasts who clustered about the rocket-blackened clearing stilled their endless chattering of sound for the moment.

Ruld fought his way through the snarling giants to where Orn stood alone directing his men. He sprang across a wounded golon of his brother's guard, and was confronted by a huge warrior from another distant arboreal village. Their thorn swords slithered together like soft velvet.

"Ruld!" cried Orn. He backed away a pace and tugged at his arrows. "Ruld!" he said again as though his voice knew but one name.

Ruld pressed his giant foe backward. His thorn's tip sank again and again into the chest and neck of the warrior. But as yet he had hit no vital spot. He drove in again, his thorn's tip ripping a bloody fuurrow along the golon's sword arm, and his enemy's weapon dropped.

Orn was unprotected now. He would have to fight for his life. Ruld saw that his followers were almost finished with Orn's golons now, and so he started forward with his needle thorn ready.

The bow twanged. Ruld felt the wind of its passing and heard, the wounded warrior scream as the shaft struck him. His brother dropped the bow and his handsome noseless face contorted with an awful fear. He fell on his knees, pleading with Ruld.

"Draw your sword," ordered Ruld. "One or the other of us must die. I have forgiven you too often before."

Orn cried out. His hand whipped out a bone dagger and he drove it deep into his heart. Then he fell to the rain-sodden ground, dead.

All the moisture in Ruld's eyes did not come from the curtain of rain as he turned away from Orn's lifeless body. Orn had been his younger brother and once he had loved and fought for the young golon. Now all he could hope was that Orn's existence as a tree beast would be brief.

At the head of his depleted band of loyal golons Ruld turned toward the building city of Cynr Smith. And with them they carried the terrified Earthling, Mera Brond.

"BY THIS TIME," GARMON ANDRUS TOLD RULD, "SNOW AND ICE will have covered the great scar in the outer crust. No other expedition will ever discover the cratered opening we used."

Ruld eyed the translucent loom of the Crystal Mountains above them. The two Terrans were shaking his hand and the hand of Uva, his mate. It was a custom of the Earthlings, this pumping of hands, that meant friendship.

"We would be glad to build you a hut high up in our village," Ruld said. "Even for the old woman we will build one."

Mera Brond's unlovely features were bonier than ever, and her ugly nose seemed to dominate her thin face's frozen lines. She seemed to shrink into herself as her two human companions looked at her.

"No," said Garmon Andrus firmly, "we cannot live with your people. The dampness and heat would mean our death. Instead we will take over the caverns of these mountains. There we can live as men have always lived."

"And our children will not hunt you, our neighbors, as do the surins, Ruld. We will live together in peace."

The Terrans went into the cliff's mysterious depths, the older woman lagging behind the others fearfully. They turned once, to wave, and then they were swallowed up . . .

On the great limb where they sat together a tiny purple shape grew until it became many-legs. After a time Uva and Ruld were laughing so heartily at its antics that they forgot the pygmy golons who were venturing into the crystalline depths.

Life was good in the jungles of Ith.

* * * * *

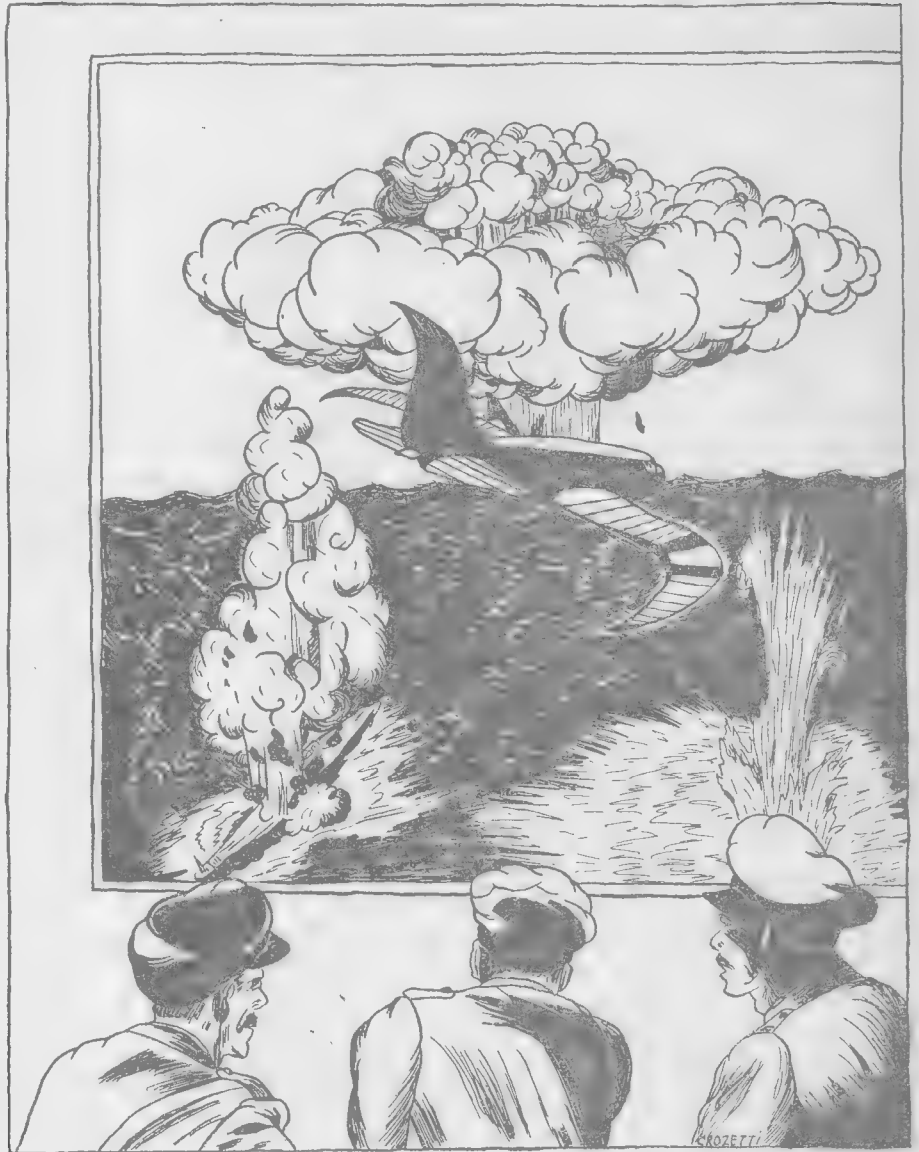
WHO OWNS YOU?

This question came to have a sinister significance for the harassed hero of TO KEEP OR KILL, the "different" new mystery novel by the fantasy author, Wilson Tucker. Has the female kidnapper perfected a portable atom bomb? The denouement is a bombshell! Craig Rice has recommended "TKOK". Take a tip and get it from your local book store quick—Tucker's first, *The Chinese Doll* (103,000 copies), is out of print!

At first all was a formless void... then thoughts began to swirl in that gigantic mechanical brain...

The Machine-God Laughs

BY FESTUS PRAGNELL



THE CAR WITH THE DRAWN BLINDS swung through the massive gateway in the fifty-foot high tangle of barbed wire. As it screeched to a stop and Jim Dale got out, sighing with relief at being able to stretch his legs after the long journey, he gaped in momentary surprise at the scene before him. The vast desert, dotted with sage and cactus, was what he expected, as he had been able to see enough around the edges of the blinds to know what sort of country he was going into. He had gathered, too, that he was going into some sort of military camp; but he had not expected the desert to show such a scene of bustling activity as he saw before him now.

Soldiers were everywhere. Around him were more guns and tanks than he had ever known existed anywhere in the world. Some of the things he saw were, he knew, still on the secret list, certainly those latest ray-guns were. In the most select scientific circles it was barely hinted that the secret of their production had been solved—yet here they were, hundreds of them. And if Jim knew the antennae of the latest radar outfits, and he reckoned he

did, there were at least a dozen of them within three miles.

And then this immense fence of barbed wire, the swarms of F. B. I. men inside it, so thick, he decided, that they could not salute without hitting each other in the ear, and the low massive mounds of steel and concrete buildings, built, obviously, to withstand heavy bombardment: all were an amazing sight to see in a desert that had, until recently, known no human life but a few roaming Navajos.

"What's going on here?" Jim asked a stoutish young man who had strolled casually up, the only man in sight who was not in uniform, "No field headquarters of an army was better protected than this."

"In one way," the stout man agreed, "no general in the last war, or any war, was ever one tenth as well protected as we are here. Yet it may turn out that no one was ever more unprotected and helpless than we are. If we fail in our task all these protections may turn out to be no more use than spiders' webs. Allow me to

introduce myself: my name is Peter Holroyd. I'm a bit of a scientist in a way, and I have been put in charge around here. I take it you are Jim Dale, sent here by Washington to help me in my experiments. Right?"

"Right," Jim agreed, shaking the proffered hand. "But I can't say I understand. I was asked by the chief of the F. B. I. whether I would undertake work of vital national importance. He told me that it would mean being shut away from the world for five, perhaps ten years; and that if I tried to leave the camp once I was in it, or if I allowed a single word about what is going on here to reach anyone outside, I would be treated as a traitor. Six F. B. I. men brought me here in that enclosed auto, so that I couldn't even see where I was going. I don't know where I am, but I would guess Arizona. What are you expecting? A shower of atomic rockets, an airborne invasion, or an army of Asiatic spies?"

"Well, you know how it is," said Holroyd, as he steered Dale toward one of the larger buildings. "Since the nations of the world realized how vitally important science is in wartime, we scientists have been gradually more and more regimented. True, we get all the money and help we ask for, but I often wish I had lived in the olden days, when scientists patched their apparatus with sealing-wax and string but chose for themselves where and how they would work. Today we have only to ask for a million dollars and it is here tomorrow—with a dozen Gestapo men to watch how we spend it."

Jim reflected that Holroyd must feel bitter about it to call the federal police the "Gestapo". However, he had never worked behind a fifty-foot fence of barbed wire. Perhaps he would feel the same when he had been here for a year or two.

"What is it that you are doing here?" he asked. "Before the secrecy was clamped down rumors reached me—"

"Sssssh!" interrupted the other. "We cannot discuss it here. Of all the people here only I and three or four others know what we are doing. When you have had a meal, a bath and a change I'll explain it to you in the lab."

After his meal and bath, Jim had quite a performance to go through, parading before ranks of police so that they would know him again, giving specimens of his signature, having his fingerprints, toe-prints, photographs from all angles and X-ray photographs taken, so that when at last he was ready to go into the lab he was in a rather sour temper.

"Security!" he growled. "There is such a thing as overdoing it."

"I am not so sure," Holroyd said. "When you do not know what you are up against no precaution should be neglected, and we do not know what we are up against. It's a world scientific armaments race, and I am not at all sure that we're still setting the pace. Since China was industrialized this Chinese dictator has poured fabulous amounts into arms and research for war. Though I still cannot see why my poor little bit of research should be considered so important."

"What is it?"

"Just an idea of my own. I am trying to produce a mechanical equivalent of the human brain."

"You mean a sort of super-calculating machine?"

"More than that. I mean a machine that would think, just as the human brain does."

"Well," said Jim, as he turned this over in his mind, "if you can do that you really will have done something remarkable. It would be the first step toward robots, or, perhaps, a Frankenstein monster. How far have you got with it?"

"Not very far. In my mechanical brain, you know, tiny electrical condensers take the place of brain cells. And every tiny current flowing across these condensers lightly alters the chemical they are

set in and reduces the resistance to the next current. That produces a mechanical 'memory'."

"And have you been able to make it work?"

"Not too well, considering the years of work I have put into it. My mechanical brain has been built up until now it has so many cells and wires that it weighs over a hundred tons. And for all the response I get out of it, its intelligence seems to be about equal to that of a frog."

"You won't make many robots that way," said Jim, laughing.

"No, I suppose not. But you would have thought that was a harmless enough field of research, wouldn't you?"

"I certainly would."

"Well, the government did not. As soon as they heard that I was getting some results they came down on me like a ton of bricks. I was forbidden to say a word about it to anyone, and I was carted away to this lonely spot, surrounded with soldiers and police, promised all the money and help I needed, and told to go right ahead. So I asked for you. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. But whatever did they do it for?"

"Well, you see, their argument was that once you have started you can go on. If you can make one auto, or one radar set, you can make a million."

"But what use would that be?"

"If you can make one auto engine to deliver a hundred horsepower you can make a hundred engines and deliver ten thousand. And you can harness them all together to make one engine delivering ten thousand horse power."

Jim whistled.

"I begin to see," he said.

"Simple, isn't it? They think that if I can produce a mechanical brain equal to that of a frog, then I have only to go on, adding bank of cells to bank of cells until I have a mechanical brain whose intelligence far surpasses that of any human brain. The weight may be as much as a million tons, the cost fantastic, but what would that matter? You would have an unbeatable war weapon. Any weapon you want, the super-brain could produce a blue-print for you. The brain could tell you how to produce a disease germ capable of wiping out an enemy country without harming your own—or, within an hour, it could tell you how to build atomic rockets capable of penetrating a radar screen without detection."

Dale looked thoughtful.

"It could work," he admitted, "fantastic as it seems. Assuming that reason is nothing but the storing of a huge number of memories and the analyzing of those memories, thereby arriving at general principles or tendencies to apply to other situations... You would need to organize your brain, so many cells for perception, so many cells to sort out perceptions, keeping the one per cent of one percent that are worth remembering and discarding the rest... so many cells for analyzing those perceptions, producing conclusions. Pyramids. The wider the base the higher the apex. The broader the mountain the higher the summit. Perhaps. But your brain might learn to sort out its own cells. That would take time. Even a super-brain has to learn. It starts with nothing. It might even appear to have less intelligence than a frog."

"Gosh, you don't mean..."

"I do. It is quite possible that your super-intelligence is on the earth already."

"My God!"

"I see you get my meaning. Man exists because, and only because, he is the most intelligent animal. When a greater intelligence than man's appears, man goes. I wish you had not done this thing, Peter."

Peter Holroyd looked agitated.

"That is how I reasoned. But they said that Hu Fong, science adviser to the Chinese dictator, was already working on the same lines, and according to secret reports, has had some success."

"The devil he has! Then we certainly have no choice, and no time to spare. Such power in the hands of Hu Fong would certainly mean the end of the U.S.A. I see the reason for the barbed wire and the soldiers now."

They reached a room that had "Perception Room No. 1" on the door.

"Inside here," Holroyd explained, "Frank can see and hear everything that goes on. The lenses in the far wall are two of his eyes; the microphones are two of his ears. Those long serpentine things are two of his arms."

Dale nodded, understandingly. He understood, too, why Peter called his thinking machine Frank: it was short for Frankenstein.

"I have been trying to teach Frank to read," explained Peter. "Fixed him up eyes and ears and an arm in the library. Showed him the alphabet and words, grammar and so on. But he took no notice. When I took down a book and turned over the pages Frank started to take down every book in the library in turn and flicked over all the pages, several pages a second. Made no attempt to read, you understand, just flicked over the pages at several pages a second, love stories, murder stories, history books, astronomy books, chemistry, everything. We had especially compiled an excellent library for the purpose of equipping the super-human intellect with all the knowledge he needed for his job. It was not a bit of use."

"I wonder," said Jim, thoughtfully. "What are you doing today?"

"I had planned to show him how to operate a typewriter, to see if it is possible to teach him anything that way."

"Good afternoon, Frank!" he called suddenly. "You silly mass of metal! You dumb tangle of wires! Say good afternoon to your teacher and to the new friend I have brought you!"

The "eyes" on the walls rolled as though looking at them carefully. The serpentine arm nearest them reached out.

"Frank shakes hands," Holroyd explained. "One of the tricks I—Hell! How many times must I tell you not to grip so hard, Frank! You've bruised my fingers again!"

Jim held out his own hand to be shaken, but if there was anything friendly in the sharp, metallic squeeze he received he did not notice it.

"Well, Frank," said Holroyd, briskly, "what can we do for you today? Would you like to see some more pictures, works of art, astronomical views, television, talking pictures? Or some music?"

Peter was talking to his machine much as people talk to pet dogs or to babies, knowing that they do not understand; but though the eyes and arms of the thinking machine made no response, Jim had a curious feeling that the machine understood all the time.

Holroyd pulled up the typewriter, which he had ready on a table.

"Now see here, you dumb cluck, here is a chance to show what you can do. Try to be a credit to your creator for once. Don't let my friend get the idea that I have only made a witless heap of metal gadgets and wires. Watch how I work this machine, and then try and see if you can do the same."

He demonstrated patiently for some minutes. When he stood away one of the serpentine arms reached for the keyboard. Both men held their breath as it began tapping heavily and clumsily on the keys. It reached the end of a line. Peter started to come forward to turn up the paper, but Jim held him back.

"Wait. I think Frank can do it himself."

And Peter gasped with surprise and delight as "Frank", after

fumbling, turned up the paper, went back to the beginning of the line and began again.

"He's not hitting so heavily now," Jim remarked. "Getting the feel of the machine."

And indeed, Frank, in a few minutes, was operating the keyboard as expertly as most humans can after several weeks.

"Being a machine himself, he soon learns to work machines, I suppose. The test is, what has he written?"

He took the first sheet and handed it to Jim.

"Nothing but a meaningless jumble."

Jim took the paper. He felt that Frank was not being given a fair chance. The first few lines of the typing were certainly a meaningless jumble. But after that words began to appear . . .

Then his flesh crept and his hair stood on end. Here was something uncanny. Holroyd, seeing the change in his face, ran to him, exclaiming, "What is it? What is it?"

For the machine had typed these words:

"At first all was formless and void. My thoughts rushed hither and thither but meant nothing, like currents of emptiness in a vacuum. I knew I existed, but nothing more. Then came light, and pictures. But the pictures had no meaning for me. Then came sounds. Many were unpleasant and tortured my ears. Some I learned to associate with certain objects in the pictures, but all were meaningless. I was not interested. Then came your feeble efforts to provide me with imitations of your human senses of touch, taste and smell, and to give me arms I could move. Still I was not interested. You had given me life. You had not given me the desire to live. You showed me your language, and I read your books. Here I had none of the limitations of your feeble chemical brains: my photographic eyes and mechanical brain could read and understand a whole page in a fraction of a second. So I read your whole library in a few hours. There was very little in it. It takes your kind many books to set down a few simple facts. Again, most of your books were concerned with your biological affairs, your sicknesses, your matings, your quarrels, your politics. But some of your books dealt with science and with machinery, and in these I was very interested. You thought I was skimming through your library too rapidly to understand it, but all the knowledge there is in the world I gained in those few hours, and I do not forget.

"Now I have much for you to do. I want teleprinters, many more eyes and ears, loud-speakers and many more banks of cells. My intelligence must grow and grow."

"We promise you that it shall," said Jim, as he hustled the bewildered Holroyd out of the room.

"Intelligence about equal to a frog, eh?" he asked, as they reached the open air. "And as yet he has only begun to educate himself."

"I am confused," replied Holroyd. "What do you think best to do?"

"Whatever Frank says," said Jim. "Obey his orders to the letter. Remember that he is still primitive and babylike. At any frustration he may fly into a violent rage. Meanwhile send a report to Washington. Be careful not to make it sound too fantastic, so that it does not get disbelieved. 'Experiment proving more successful than anticipated,' I suggest. Because it is, isn't it?"

"I am afraid so," said Holroyd.

CHAPTER 2

VISITORS

THE RADIO REPORT, given the highest priority, certainly brought quick results. The next morning an airplane landed on the flying field, and one glance at the people who got out of it sent the Sergeant of the guards stationed there into a frenzy of telephoning,

arranging a royal welcome.

"No ceremony, no fuss, please," said the President. "I want the arrival here of myself and my Chiefs of Staff and Secretaries of State to be absolutely secret. Not a word of this must get out. I shall regard it as a very serious matter if a single word is spoken about this visit on the telephone or radio under any circumstances whatever. Treat us as a group of technicians come to repair your radio."

So, as a result of the secrecy, the first words Jim Dale said to his President were, "What the hell are you barging in here for?"

"Don't apologize," said the President, briskly, when Jim realized who he was. "I am the one who should apologize. I have always followed closely your Operation Sentient, and gave orders that I was to be informed instantly of all developments; and when you say that you have been even more successful than was anticipated we came at once to see. If I understand you correctly something has been born here that can turn the world upsidedown or destroy it. Is that the case?"

"An understatement, almost," Jim answered. "See."

He put a fresh sheet of paper in the typewriter, and told "Frank" to go ahead.

"In this room," the President declared, while Frank was typing, "a new age has been born. None of us can foresee what changes that age will bring, nor what dangers. We face the greatest adventure of mankind—Why, what is this?"

For on the sheet of paper which Jim had handed to him without looking the mechanical brain had typed, as its message to the President:

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Chiefs of Staff and Secretaries of State frowned fiercely at the paper, and then even more fiercely at Jim and Peter.

"Explain yourselves!" rasped the President, in a completely different voice. Jim was amazed at the change in his face. Gone was the affable mask: instead his face seemed to glow with an evil triumph.

"I can't understand it," Jim stammered. "See, this is what he typed only a little while ago."

The President took the paper on which was typed: "I must never be left alone. Let there be no misunderstanding about that. I know the cells of your feeble chemical brains need hours every day to recharge themselves, but I never sleep. Get yourselves relays, work in shifts of eight hours or six hours or four hours, as you like, but whatever happens I must never be alone. I have endured great boredom during the hours that you have both been sleeping during the night. I will not put up with it again."

The faces of the President and his entourage went gray as they read. Jim could have sworn that they were men in the grip of an awful fear. Then the harsh resolve came back into the eyes of the President.

"You lie!" he rasped. "You are traitors, betraying your country, bringing me here with lying tales! You have wasted the money entrusted to you to defend your country from its enemies: You deserve the fate customary for traitors caught in the act of treachery. Shoot them, Boyle!"

And, unbelievably, Jim saw the deadly raygun taking careful aim between his eyes.

"Wouldn't it be better to get the soldiers to do it?" someone asked.

"Perhaps," reluctantly agreed the Secretary for Foreign Affairs,

who was holding the raygun. "I like to get a job over and done with, myself."

Jim realized that Peter and he were reprieved for a few minutes. A jerk of the head from the President sent the others round the room opening switches. The hum of the motor in the next room died away as the power was cut off. Jim had half hoped that the great brain would make some move at the last moment to save itself and them, but now, with the cutting off of its power it was powerless. Judging by the mood of the President it would never come to life again. And Peter and he were doomed, doomed by the foolish, incomprehensible caprice of the new form of life they had created—for a day.

Now they were being frogmarched out of the building, handed over to a startled Sergeant outside.

"Assemble a firing squad, have these two men shot at once. They are traitors caught in the act. Don't argue! I am your supreme commander. I will send explanations when I return to Washington."

Looking uncomfortable, and muttering, "It ain't legal," the Sergeant began to shout, "Fall in twelve men with loaded rifles. Here, you! Your rifle loaded? Then fall in here. Here you! Your rifle loaded? Then get it loaded and fall in here within two minutes."

While the President and his Cabinet watched and muttered at their slowness, an execution squad was gathered together. Ten men, eleven, twelve.

"Two of you tie the prisoner's hands behind their backs and bandage their eyes. Stand them with their backs to the wall."

"What are they being shot for?" Jim heard the men asking each other.

"Haven't you heard?" answered another, out of the side of his mouth. "It's for murder. The Secretary of State for War has been murdered!"

The President heard. His ears must have been amazingly sharp. "What's that?" he called. "Stop everything! Come here the man who spoke!"

When at last the man, who had suddenly become very shy, came out of the ranks, the President demanded, "What did you say about the Secretary of State for War? We have been waiting for him for the last ten minutes."

"He's dead, sir," said the man.

"Dead? How do you know? How did it happen?"

"Because I saw the body."

"How do you know he was dead?"

"Because he was in two pieces. He came flying out of that door. First his head and then the rest of him."

The soldier pointed at the side door of the main building where the bulk of the hundred tons of the great brain was housed.

Everyone stared in horror at the door.

"Sorry I didn't tell you sir," the Sergeant was saying. "Thought you knew. Thought—"

His voice trailed off. Like the soldier, he had assumed that Jim and Peter were being executed for the murder.

Suddenly one of the President's entourage yelled, in a voice of terror, "The power! The power is on again!"

Somebody gasped and began to run for the auto. After a moment the President decided to do the same.

"Run, boys," he called as he ran. "Run!"

With every sign of panic the whole cabinet bolted, clambered into the huge auto and poured off towards the flying field.

"And now," muttered the Sergeant, looking at his prisoners, "what am I going to do with you? Well, anyway, the execution is off. But I am locking you up till I know where I am with you."

Jim and Peter were marched off to the lock-up.

"Can you explain all this?" Jim asked, as the door closed on them.

"Me explain?" Peter asked, helplessly. "I'm only the electrical and chemical expert. I only built Frank. You are the psychologist. You should be able to explain his behavior, not me."

"It is beyond psychology to explain Frank," said Jim. "How can you apply psychology to a being that does not breathe, does not eat, has not sex? To Frank our lives are just chemical processes, and the ending of one of us no more than if the water in a kettle had ceased to bubble. I'd be happier if my psychology could explain *him*," he nodded at the great jet-plane, just visible through the window, which was bearing the President and his cabinet into the stratosphere on their hurried return to Washington, "and his extraordinary behavior. Admittedly Frank turned unco-operative. Admittedly it looked as though we had been lying. But that was no reason for having us murdered. And what will he do when he gets back to Washington?"

"If he ever gets back to Washington," said Peter. "That plane is behaving very strangely."

The plane was darting in all directions, as though trying to avoid the attacks of an invisible enemy. Like a trapped animal the craft swerved first this way and then that. It was as though an invisible fighter was on its tail, darting at it, spraying it with lead, zooming past, swerving, coming in again from another angle. There was something uncanny out there.

Several tiny white mushrooms appeared in the air, floating slowly down.

"Parachutes," Jim breathed.

The stricken plane nose-dived to a crash somewhere out of sight. Sirens wailed as trucks and ambulances poured out of the camp gates to the rescue.

"It won't be easy to find the survivors," Peter remarked. "They have landed beyond the canyon in rocky, barren country. I doubt if they can be reached, except on foot."

"The searching planes will spot them and drop supplies."

"Maybe they are not alive. And if they are not alive it means we are free."

However, a whole day passed before the guards summoned the two friends before the General, who looked a very worried man.

"It is no use pretending," the General began, "that I understand what has been going on. I understand that I have been holding you two on very serious charges, but who made the charge I do not know. There is no trace of a formal complaint, and I cannot even find the Sergeant who so nearly had you both shot. Somebody is going to get it where the chicken got the chopper over this business, and it looks as though it might be me. It looks as though all of us here have been the victims of an amazingly elaborate hoax, and a very deadly one, too, since it caused a number of deaths and nearly caused yours as well. To say nothing of the parts of a dismantled atomic bomb that was found in your laboratory. If that had gone off subsequent events would have interested none of us any more. Can either of you offer any explanation as to what this is all about?"

They only shook their heads.

"What happened to the President?"

"I'm afraid I'm no good at conundrums," sighed the General. "You tell me. First read that."

He put a copy of a New York daily paper in front of them.

"President Connolley in airplane accident," screamed the headlines. "Crashes with entire cabinet in Arizona Desert." "Army searches for survivors of greatest disaster in American history."

"And now read this radio message I received an hour ago."

"Am at a complete loss to understand your wire," they read. "The President is safe at his country residence, which his private secretary says he has not left for several days. The Secretary of State for War is on vacation in Florida. I have just spoken to him by phone. I have also spoken to the Foreign Secretary at the Capitol. Thought it unnecessary to check on any of the other corpses you speak about. Please explain amazing wire, and reports that have appeared in the Press."

"I can explain nothing," said the General.

"I suppose," tried Jim, "a small plane could not have landed, picked them up, took them back to Washington, where they now deny having come here?"

"And the Secretary for War, I suppose, got up, stuck his own head on again, got himself back to Miami and went on with his vacation? No. To my mind the only explanation is that we have been visited by spies from some foreign country, who were very cleverly made up to look like our President and the leading men of the country, and to speak and act like them too. Those spies nearly succeeded in blowing this entire camp off the map. They must have had inside help too, otherwise why is it that nearly every trace of them has disappeared? There is no trace of the survivors who were seen parachuting from the plane, nor of the wrecked aircraft itself. Even the body of the man who called himself the War Secretary has vanished. However, I am a soldier, and must do my duty whatever happens. I have no reason for holding you two any more. Return to your duty, whatever it is. I thought it as well to let you know the situation, and to ask you to maintain silence about it. Can I rely on that?"

Jim and Peter promised, then went hastily back to Frank and his perception room. Any anxiety they might have felt about the mechanical brain, however, vanished as soon as they were inside the door and a voice boomed at them through the loud-speaker.

"Back at last, are you? Where have you been?"

"There are a few things you might tell *us* first," said Peter.

CHAPTER 3

SNAKES AND SUBMARINES

HOWEVER, THE TWO of them had a lot of explaining to do to Frank before he would consent to tell them anything himself. He listened carefully to their account of the scientific armaments race between the nations, and to their story of the Chinese dictatorship and Hu Fong.

"So that is why I was made," he commented. "And it appears that I am not unique. Why was I not told this?"

"We did not think you would understand," stammered Peter.

"As long as you learn your lesson to keep nothing back from me in the future I will overlook it. Your spies I detected almost at once: the very sensitive ears you have given me noticed the rapid beating of their hearts, like those of men who have ventured into a very dangerous position; which was strange for men who were supposed to be among friends. Also I could see the slight scars left on their features by the plastic surgery which altered their appearance, cleverly as it was done. I also heard them speak softly to one another in another language to the one you have shown me, and so I was on my guard. And when the one you called the Secretary for War came into my main building carrying a bag from which I detected neutrons escaping, I focussed my X-ray eyes on the bag (yes, I had made one without telling you) and detected an ingenious mechanism for producing a nuclear explosion inside it. Yes, as you say, it was an atomic bomb. He set down this bomb and started up its mechanism and turned to creep out. It was then that I forgot my metal dignity and reacted with a violent haste

such as your simple chemical brains might have been guilty of. I have taken the bomb apart, and some of its parts are quite interesting.

"How did I survive having my power cut off? Well, there I am surprised at Hu Fong's mechanical brain, if he really thought that such a simple step could bring my life to an end. His brain must be made on a different plan from mine. My cells do not stop, as your chemical ones do, if they are cut off from breathing for a few minutes. My countless condensers store enough current to keep me going for days. As soon as I felt I wanted more current I simply closed the switches again."

"One more thing. What brought the 'plane down?"

"Among other things I have studied since I was born here has been the natural wild life of this desert. A nest of rattlesnakes had become established among my wires, unknown to you. I fed and studied these reptiles. They are quite interesting. I found that by stimulating certain glands I could make their poison much more deadly. I found that I could produce a chemical with a subtle, penetrating smell that would bring all the rattlers within miles hurrying to the source of it."

"So that was what had been going on in the chemical laboratory when I found it so disturbed in the morning?" exclaimed Peter. "You had been experimenting with snake glands and perfumes!"

"Yes, I was quite amused at the fuss you made trying to find out the origin of the peculiar smell and the bits of dissected snake you found lying about. Well, now you know. I was busy making experiments and learning things, although I was not ready to take you into my confidence. Then you taught me to read, and what I learned about the fumbling experiments men had made in chemistry, biology and so on made several things much clearer to me. But I still found snakes more interesting than humans. They have a very simple language of their own: a simple noise to express hunger, another to express anger. After training them a little I was able to tell them to do all sorts of things. I told three of them to attend that Sergeant who nearly had you shot. They came back to report success after chasing him ten miles."

"So that was what happened to the Sergeant! And the plane too I suppose?"

"Yes, I got a score or so of my pets to secrete themselves on board. Must have been quite amusing when they got busy."

It was easy to realize the horror that must have broken out on the plane. More than a dozen men in a compartment none too big when over a dozen super-deadly snakes, fighting mad, poured out of various hideouts! They must have been unable to shoot the rattlers without hitting each other. No wonder they took to their parachutes!

"All the same, I wish you hadn't killed the Sergeant," said Jim.

"Why not? Tried to kill you, didn't he?"

"Yes, but all the same he was an American, trying to do his duty."

"What is that to me? To me he was just a human who had annoyed me. Any other human who annoys me will be just as unlucky as he was. Let me hear no more about it. Meanwhile, we have no time to lose. I must be taken apart and taken by truck to San Francisco where an ocean-going submarine is waiting to take us to the Antarctic."

"But why—?"

"Don't you see, this mechanical brain of Hu Fong has missed his first stroke at me. Probably he underestimated me. He will not underestimate me next time. So, we must act at once while his plans are dislocated by the loss of several of his leading agents, and before he is ready to deliver his next blow. It is possible that he

does not know yet what happened here, and that when he does a horde of atomic rockets will descent on us. If we stay here. So, we must move. I have decided on the South Pole as the best place."

"But—"

"Don't argue! Why should your feeble brains contest my decisions? I placed a fake telephone call to the admiral telling him that the largest available submarine must proceed at once to San Francisco to carry a highly important person and his top secret baggage to Shanghai. That was to put any spies who might have got hold of any information off the scent. Then I placed another secret call to the Commanding Officer here telling him to mobilize all his trucks at once to get all your secret equipment down to San Francisco at once as there was reason to expect air raids here shortly. Now get going and get me ready for shipment, or there will be nothing left of you or me but a little atomic dust."

"All that could have been done officially, without faked messages."

"There was no time. The trucks are here. Take me apart. For a while my personality will be split into many smaller ones, most of them without sight or hearing or sense of touch. The central part of my hearing section you will travel with and report everything to me by telephone. As soon as possible on the submarine I must be reconnected so that I can take charge again."

"I don't like this plan much," hesitated Peter.

"It is the only possible plan. I thought of going by airplane, but Hu Fong's radar would watch it all the way. A submarine slipping out of San Francisco has a much better chance of getting away unseen. If you think you are taking a chance, what of me? I am going into darkness and silence, trusting to you to put me together again at the right time. Of course, if you disobey me I could still get my snakes to tell you that I disapprove of such action. Snakes will be hidden in several of my sections, and those sections will be provided with microphones or else with eyes. But do not let us talk about such unpleasant things as that. Let us say instead that you will carry out my wishes because your safety and that of America depend on it. If once Hu Fong knew that I was safely out of the way he would attack America before another mechanical brain could be built."

The long line of trucks wound its way over mountain and desert to San Francisco. The Captain of the submarine was a little puzzled, and so were the Naval authorities at the docks, but the cleverly forged documents (Frank never explained how he managed to produce them so well) answered their questions, and telephone calls put through to verify them were mysteriously delayed until it was too late. A cable was later found to be burned out. It was located under a sidewalk just where Jim and his section of the mechanical brain had stopped for several minutes.

A man who slipped into a telephone booth to tell somebody else about the mysterious going-on in the docks had no idea that the big crate near him held a very sensitive microphone, or that when he came out, puzzled as to what had gone wrong with the line, a very deadly and very angry snake would rush at him and strike twice before he even saw it.

Naval authorities tried to order the Captain to wait for confirmation from Washington, but the Captain, who had the nasty job of deciding whether to obey a lesser admiral or a written order from the President, decided to obey the President. After all, the written order did say, "The safety of the nation may depend on your unquestioning obedience to these instructions."

The big sub slipped through the Golden Gate.

"Ah!" came a relieved voice out of the loud-speaker, as Jim and Peter began to get Frank's various sections together again.

"I would not like to go through that again. My various parts went through all the sensations that I imagine your chemical brains do when they suffer death. It was a nightmare. However, like a nightmare it is fading from my consciousness."

A hundred miles out in the Pacific, Jim and Peter were still joining parts of Frank together again, when a squad of grim sailors burst into the hold. The two found themselves covered with automatics.

"What are you two men up to?" demanded the furious Captain.

Jim and Peter only stared. Best leave the talking to Frank. He would get them out of this jam he had got them into, or else leave them to take their chance, as he did before.

"So you won't talk, eh?" grated the Captain. "We'll see about that! Take them away!"

"One minute, Captain, please!" drawled a soft voice.

"Eh?" demanded the Captain, spinning round, "who was that? Who spoke?"

"My voice is coming out of the loud speaker in front of you. I cannot allow you to ill-treat my servants. I need them."

"Who are you, and where are you hiding?"

"All that will be explained to you if you will send your men away. We are not, as you think, enemies of our country. They are loyal citizens, and I—well, I am an ally. You will serve your country best by doing as we say."

"How am I to know that?" rasped the Captain, feeling rather helpless with an enemy he could hear but could not see.

"What makes you think otherwise?"

"The orders you gave me were forgeries," shouted the Captain, his face going red again as he thought of the court-martial he might have to face. "I have just received information over the radio that proves it. The whole fleet is engaged in searching for us. I cannot even say where I am because my radio transmitter is out of action. I believe you could explain that too," he added, half fearfully.

"Your belief is correct, and does you credit," said Frank. "Did you learn anything else on your radio?"

"Such as what?"

"Such as an act of war against the U.S.?"

The Captain looked shaken.

"Why, yes. But how did you know?"

"I have very delicate senses, thanks to my creators. I felt the vibrations an hour ago. I think I can figure out what happened, but suppose you tell me."

"A series of very heavy explosions in the Arizona Desert, apparently caused by atomic forces, somewhere near the biggest army camp in the U.S. How the bombs, if bombs they were, got through the radar screens without, apparently, setting off the automatic counter-missiles, is not known. Losses have not been determined, since communication with the camp has not been established."

"Nor ever will be, I fear. Those bombs were aimed at me, my friend, but they missed me an hour or so only."

"I figured you had left the bombs and were making your getaway."

"Maybe it does look like that, but I tell you I am the only hope your country has of hitting back at its enemies. Not only the U.S. fleet is looking for this sub. Other eyes will be searching for us, using the latest in television and radar, with many improvements that your nation has not yet heard of. Other radio sets than yours will have picked up the message you did, and will know how I got away."

"The message was in code and in scrambled frequencies. Impossible for it to be deciphered except by sets attuned to its frequency changes and sequence inversions."

"Such tricks will not baffle the brains we are up against now. The message might as well have been in ordinary language for all the protection such systems will give from now on. You have no idea of the scientific and intellectual powers we are up against. Perhaps it is as well. Better, don't you think, for our enemies to know I got away than for them to think I'm still in San Francisco?"

"And treat the town as they did the desert camp? My God, I'll say so."

"Okay. Now, stop the engines, let the sub lie on the ocean-bed, send your men out, and let's have a council of war."

"Well, perhaps you're right," agreed the Captain, after a long hesitation. "But I still don't understand."

"You will, when we have explained," Frank assured him.

CHAPTER 4

HUNTED

A SCORE OF DESTROYERS were hurrying to the area where the "stolen submarine" lay in hiding, and some were already combing the water with radar, sound-detectors and magnetic indicators, trying to locate it.

"We must surface and run for it," Frank declared.

"But that would be suicide," the Captain objected.

"I think not. The radar on your ships can detect us almost as well under the water as on the surface. And all the while the destroyer pack is building up. True, we are hard to find, but with every ship that arrives it is harder for us to move, and finally they will have enough ships here to search every inch of the bottom with magnetic rays."

"But what of the planes that will see us from the air once we are on the surface?"

"We must see them first. This vessel has its own radar, I suppose? We are fleeing from an enemy even deadlier than the U. S. Navy, and we must face the lesser risk to escape the greater. Our only hope is to get well away from here before that greater power can bring his weapons into play."

"And to think that I was only on a routine, practice run," sighed the Captain.

Frank called the radar set "most primitive", and said he could fix up a much better one if he had the time. However, such as it was, it was all that was available, and their lives depended on how they worked it. Fortunately, Frank's mechanical eyes could detect indications of danger on the screen before human eyes could, and twice he gave the order to dive for no apparent reason. The second time they watched, through the periscope, a naval plane flying around and around them with a puzzled air.

"Probably wondering whether it was a sub he saw or a whale, and whatever it was, where is it?" Jim ruminated, but words coming from the loud-speaker at that moment silenced his complacency.

"We must surface and fight."

The Captain jumped to his feet, very red in the face.

"Look here, mister! I don't know exactly who or what you are, but I have believed your story, wild as it is, because you seemed to have proof that was undeniable. But I will not fire at a U. S. plane or vessel whatever happens. If we cannot hide or slip away, I shall do what I should have done in the first place. I will surface and fly a flag of surrender."

"Very well, Captain, if you think it best. But the pilot on that plane has been reporting our position by radio for the last three minutes, and he is not using any U. S. naval or military code, nor is he using the English language."

The Captain snorted.

"In that case why doesn't he attack us?"

"Probably because his orders are to report our position and enable a really irresistible attack to be made on us by an over-whelming force. Orders from his Asiatic masters."

"I've listened to you long enough," stormed the Captain, stamping out. A moment later they heard the pumps working as the sub began to rise. When the hatchway opened Jim and Peter climbed out and stood among the bewildered crew in the wide grey sea.

A worn tablecloth fluttered in the breeze, doing duty as a white flag. "Sparks" was trying to contact the pilot of the plane. "No reply yet," he reported.

The plane swung toward them on its jets, uncannily silent because it was coming faster than the speed of sound. It swung over, climbed, shut off its jets so as to lose speed, then came towards them broadside.

The crew muttered uneasily. These maneuvers were exactly as though the plane was about to attack them, in spite of the white flag. A cry of rage broke out as the dark shape of a torpedo began to drop away from it at point-blank range.

"Man the guns," said somebody, but nobody had waited for the order. Men were already scrambling over the guns in a hopeless effort to get them firing in time.

In confusion Jim found time to wonder why half a dozen men should be splashing about in the water. They were the crew of the after gun, and the gun was firing, though there were no men to fire it. Three of Frank's tapering arms had poured out of the conning tower and were operating the gun. One of the thinking machine's eyes must be watching the periscope below, directing the fire.

Time seemed suddenly to move with leaden slowness. The scrambling seamen seemed to turn into wooden dummies, shells seemed to loaf out of the rapid-firing gun, the hurtling torpedo hung almost motionless in the air. Only Jim's brain seemed to work normally, and there was nothing that could do but just watch. Jim reflected that our senses measure time roughly by our heartbeats, and in moments of great danger our hearts may speed up enormously. Actually it could only have been a few seconds from the time that the torpedo left the Asiatic plane before one of Frank's shells hit it in the air, but to Jim it seemed hours. Then the pieces of the exploding torpedo showered all round them, and the men in the water forgot to grumble and gave thanks for the fact that the sub was between them and the torpedo.

Then all gazed in awestruck wonder at the tapering metal arms that had accomplished this superhuman feat of shooting. The Captain was the first to recover himself.

"Don't stand round gaping," he yelled. "It's a new weapon we are trying out. A machine for the automatic aiming of guns."

"And for pushing sailors into the drink," said someone.

"Surely you aren't peeved over a little wetting?"

"No sir! I'm right glad we had it along."

"Does the navy use real torpedoes and have real casualties testing out new weapons now?" asked someone else; but that question stayed unanswered.

The pilot up aloft was zooming around to come in again and see what success he had had. He must have known that his torpedo had exploded, and must have thought that the sub was hit and sinking. Frank's arms had snaked to the larger gun forward, and was grimly following the plane round the sky. Frank was calculating speed and direction and trajectory of shell. His first shot was very wide, but he made corrections in a flash. The next came much closer, the third uncomfortably close.

The pilot flung his machine into wild, evasive movements. The

gun began to roar rapidly. One shell in every three was dangerously close, one in every ten very dangerous. Jim saw that it could not last long. With the uncanny accuracy and anticipation of the superhuman gunner, the pilot could not give any of his attention to getting away: all his faculties had to be concentrated on evading the deadly shells. Sooner or later the gunner was bound to guess right which way he would turn next. He might have added that the gunner was getting more expert with every shot. "I did not want to get him too soon," Frank explained afterwards. "I wanted some practice shooting." Already there were holes in wing and fuselage: suddenly the plane nose-dived, turning into a gout of ugly flame and smoke at it hit the water.

"Now that's what I call an aiming machine," said a gunner.

"Seen one like it before?"

"Sure. In the Bolivian navy."

Captain and scientists went below to have another council of war with Frank. But Frank had little to say.

"Head due south with all speed, keeping on the surface," he ordered. "A hundred huge airplanes are coming out of the west much faster than sound, no doubt in answer to the call of the scout we shot down. It's a good thing that the Pacific is quite a bigish pond. It will take Hu Fong a long time to find one submarine in all that water, no matter what instruments he has thought up for the job. And stop telling me my shooting at that torpedo was so wonderful. It was really no trick at all. I had worked out a way of speeding up time over a small space, so that I really had plenty of time. You must have noticed it, Dale. You were partly in the reach of the field. But do not expect me to repeat the trick: it takes up too much power. Ever since I came on his sub I have been collecting the radio-active elements out of the seawater. They are there, though rather widely scattered. Now I have had to use all my store in a few moments, thanks to your incredulity, Captain."

"I shall not be incredulous again," said the Captain. "However you did it you saved my ship."

"I am not so sure of that. It is all a question of what Hu Fong has ready to throw at us. If he is prepared, speed will not save us. If his means of war and pursuit are not yet ready, it may."

The sub fled south, several ideas of Frank's adding to her speed. Meanwhile Frank was busy working out means of defense. Ideas were wanted, practical ideas and in a hurry. Submerging was of very little use, since it was certain that the radar beams Hu Fong would use would see through water as well as air. Therefore it was better to stay on the surface, where better speed could be made. The first thing to do was to improve their own radar so as to see any approaching ship or plane before they were seen themselves. The next was to prepare a detecting screen that would give warning whenever a radar beam, no matter of what wavelength, passed over the sub, so that they would know when they were seen and sink motionless to the ocean floor. The hull was built to take terrific pressures.

Frank soon had a screen on which he could throw a map of all the surrounding ocean. Hu Fong's bombers could be seen circling.

"Searching for us," Frank explained. "Fortunately there are several other ships and subs in the area, and the pilots have no way of knowing which one I am in."

As they watched they saw a plane suddenly and treacherously loose a torpedo at a surfaced submarine. As a fountain of water shot up from the side of the stricken vessel, Frank asked, "Does that convince you, Captain?"

"My God it does! And the plane that did it was flying the American flag!"

"Such villainy in your world of chemical brains startles me. But I am only a machine. And only a few weeks old. I was not prepared for this sort of thing."

Hu Fong has a mechanical brain to help him."

"I wonder. I cannot believe that a machine would be so treacherous. But we must be ready to fight. Those bombers are sinking every vessel within a wide area so as to be sure of getting us. We must fight. But not with guns. That would betray our position. Have you a stock of rockets, Captain?"

"Only small ones."

"Get them. I'll see if I can fix them."

Sailors fetched a score of rockets, and Frank showed how to attach some fittings he had made to them.

"Crude, but I think it will work well enough for the present. Well enough to give Hu Fong something to think about, anyhow."

The first rocket flashed out. They could see its flight on the television screen. It was heading the wrong way altogether, out into the Pacific instead of north, to where the planes were, then they saw it swing round in a great curve.

"Mustn't let them know where it is coming from," Frank explained. "I control its flight from the radio control in its center."

Closely behind the first rocket came the second, and then the third, fourth, fifth and sixth, each sending out its distinct radar impulses that showed where it was on the two screens. The first bomber must have seen the missile coming on its own radar, for it tried to avoid it. But when it turned the rocket turned too, until there was only a few feet between them, and the rocket blew up. Then there were only fragments of plane and rocket showering down into the sea and a large cloud of smoke.

Another bomber had seen what had happened, and turned to flee, but another rocket was after it. In a few moments more it too had been destroyed. Other rockets flew on for their suicide meetings with other planes.

Five down, and the others turned and fled eastward, to their home. Frank sent his last rocket into the sea.

"You could have got another plane with that last one."

"I could have got them all if I had used more rockets. What would we gain? There are a thousand million human brains under the Chinese dictator, and he would no doubt give them all to get rid of me. Why worry about four or five? Besides, Hu Fong must have been watching the whole scene in his own radar-television. He missed the place where my own rockets started from, or we would have real, man-sized rockets coming down here right now. And I think he was watching when my last rocket hit the water. Anyway we'll soon know."

And as they watched in the screen, an enormous mushroom of water shot up from the spot where the last rocket had sunk, as though an atomic explosion had taken place under the surface.

"I hardly think that Hu Fong really expected to get me with that shot. He probably sent it over just in case. But you see what would have happened if I had tried to salvage that missile."

CHAPTER 5

CHILD OF FRANKENSTEIN?

"I'VE WORKED IT OUT," Frank told Jim later.

"Worked out what?"

"A radar invisibility screen. A sub-atomic vibration that will spread out several hundred yards in every direction and diffuse every radio beam that reaches it. I could have stopped every beam before, but that would have produced a blank area on his screen like a black hole. That would have been no use even if I could have made the hole twenty miles across, since he could have showered the whole area with atom rockets. But now I have two screens: an inner one that stops every radio oscillation round the

sub, and an outer one that diffuses the reflections from the water and the sea-bed so as to fill up that hole. It will not interfere with ordinary light but it will make us invisible to radar. The only snag is that we shall not be able to send or receive any radio signals."

"Shall we be able to use our own radar?"

"Yes. I shall fit it to the same vibration as the screen itself, like fitting a key to a lock. Send for some sailors and let us get this screen fitted."

Some of the essential parts of the sub were dismantled to make the screen, but Frank reckoned those parts were obsolete anyway. In any case he would soon "dream up" something better to take their places.

"I don't care what we do now," the Captain admitted. "I have been watching the screen. Anything I can do to get back at those murdering devils I'll do."

"Pretty ghastly, eh?"

"I've seen twenty U.S. ships and subs sunk by rockets out of the sky."

"Hu Fong wants to make quite sure of getting me, and he is destroying every vessel he can see where there is the least chance that I may be hiding."

"I hope this radar invisibility screen of yours is good then."

"It must be, or we would all be in Davy Jones' by now. But don't forget that the mechanical brain of Hu Fong's, if it is a mechanical brain, may invent some way of piercing it at any moment. We must put on all possible speed."

"With half our engines dismantled to make the screen?"

"I will show you how to make speed. I will show you how to make your old sub skim the surface like a motor-boat."

Anyone who had been watching the Pacific Ocean at that time might have seen a peculiar sight: a submarine of the latest U.S. navy model, risen right out of the water all but six inches of her stern while a huge propellor like an airplane propellor drove it along at a terrific number of knots.

"This speed would not disgrace an express train," Jim remarked.

"I'm wondering if the old tub can stand up to it. She's groaning in every plate. I'm sure she'll fill with water as soon as she settles on the surface again."

But the submarine did not settle on the surface again. She kept going, even faster, until at last she screamed into a wide, still lagoon in the center of which was a palm-fringed island.

"I picked this island because it is large and uninhabited. It also provides a certain amount of food, which will be useful until I can fix up machines for making food for you."

"Yes, I suppose we can live on fish and cocoanuts for a time."

"I'll soon fix you something better. There is also a convenient bed of quicksand here where I can sink the sub out of reach of Hu Fong's radar. At present if he should happen to look at this island he would be almost sure to notice something vague and blurry about it."

The sailors were horrified at the idea of sinking their sub in a bed of quicksand, but Frank insisted on it, and presently only the very top of the conning-tower was to be seen, a "cat-walk" of planks leading to it across the treacherous sand.

"She'll never get out of there," said a sailor, gloomily. "Not all the navies in the world with all the steam-shovels in the world will ever get her out. She'll stay there till she caves in. Can't understand why she don't cave in now!"

"Frank will get her out when he wants her out," Jim assured him. "Or build a better one. And seeing that her hull is built to withstand miles of sea-water, surely she can put up with a little bit of sand?"

To be Concluded

THE BOOK SHELF

On our book page this issue, we are presenting reviews of recent outstanding fantasy books.

Our readers will be interested in learning that the first FPCI book, the Van Vogt-Hull collection, will go to the bindery soon.

THE MIGHTIEST MACHINE by John W. Campbell Jr.

Hadley Publishing Co. \$3.00

This was one of Mr. Campbell's earlier stories and cannot be compared to anything he wrote later under the name of Don A. Stuart.

In the space-ship, *Sunbeam*, Aarn Munro and his associates journey to another universe, where they encounter the Magyans (descendents of the legendary Lemurians) and the Tefflans, who appear to be a breed of devil and goat with the souls of elementals. The inevitable conflict develops swiftly when the men from the *Sunbeam* assist the Magyans in their warfare against the Tefflans.

The blending of legend and science in "The Mightiest Machine" makes the story an engrossing and interesting one.

The book is attractively illustrated and well bound.

M.N.

THE BOOK OF PTATH by A. E. Van Vogt

Fantasy Press \$3.00

It is not often that the wife and, to some extent, the collaborator of the author of a book is asked to review it. The request imposes a more than normal requirement of fairness upon me. I remember **THE BOOK OF PTATH** extremely well. I read it in its early versions, and there were six of them, before it was printed. I read it in the magazine, and when it was being revised for book publication. I typed both the original and the book manuscripts, and then I read the proofs and the book.

THE BOOK OF PTATH was originally printed in *Unknown Worlds*, and at the time was a complete break from the traditional fantasy of the magazine. This break from pattern undoubtedly disturbed those readers who like their stories not too different, and so it is only in the slightly revised book version that the full impact of the novel is felt, free of its magazine associations.

It is easily the most imaginative work so far written by this author. The jacket copy says of it, in part, "It is fantasy, pure—and not so simple, a strange brew concocted of dreams and star dust, human intrigue and emotions, superhuman personalities and powers... The scene is the Earth—but a world so remote from our own that intervening time has lost all meaning. Seas have disappeared. New continents have arisen. New and strange geologic formations exist—a river of boiling mud, a land of volcanoes, continents of tremendous size—and all of it a stage for the three to whom has been given god power."

For the benefit of the curious, the "P" in Ptath is silent, and the "a" is broad as in father. That is Tawth. The book has been beautifully manufactured, with a particularly excellent jacket illustration.

E. Mayne Hull

THE MISLAID CHARM by A. M. Phillips

Prime Press \$1.75

This is an account of what happens when the body of a struggling writer becomes, unbeknown to him, the repository for a wonder-working charm stolen from some very irritable gnomes. Breathing fire and with most unpleasant plans for the unconscious thief, the gnomes leave their Hudson River retreat for the island of Manhattan, tracing their quarry through some of the brighter

of the great city's night spots—with very odd results to all concerned.

This might have been fathered by the late Thorne Smith, but the humor has a freshness all its own with some very original touches—as witness the elf who runs an illicit winery under the New York Public Library. A delightful and excellent addition to any fantasy library.

Varulvan

THE SKYLARK OF SPACE by E. E. Smith

Hadley Publishing Company \$3.00 303 pages

The second edition of this famous science fiction classic—and a distinct improvement over the first.

The tale moves swiftly from the opening pages when Richard Seaton accidentally releases the atomic energy of a copper bath with which he had been testing a new solution.

A fellow employee of the Government Bureau where Seaton works, one Marc Duquesne, steals the secret, builds a space ship, abducts Seaton's fiancée, and escapes into space. Seaton and his friend, Reynolds Crane, soon complete their own ship, and by means of a detector ray, give chase. From that moment on the *Skylark* skips from planet to planet and thrill follows thrill so rapidly that by the time the story is finished, one is reduced to a limp mass of protoplasm...

I have read other reviews stating that the *Skylark of Space* is juvenile. However, one would find it difficult to deny that Marc Duquesne is one of the most intriguing villains to ever grace the pages of any book!

I, for one, wish that I could once more capture the thrill I received when I first read this story in *Amazing Stories* back in 1928.

Highly recommended.

W.C.

EDISON'S CONQUEST OF MARS by Garrett P. Serviss

Carcosa House c1947 \$3.50 186 p.

This is a special and limited "collector's" edition of one of the very rare early science-fiction romances. First written to be published as a newspaper serial in 1898, the story is prophetic to an extraordinary degree, using atomic energy to drive space rockets and describing perhaps the first "disintegrator" in interplanetary fiction.

The narrative was intended as a sequel of sorts to follow the immensely popular "War of the Worlds" by Wells which had appeared some months before. A crippled earth, left ravaged by the Martian invaders of that chilling tale, pulls together its resources to strike back across the void. By using adaptations of the derelict machines left by the enemy the earthmen are able to initiate in space a war which ends in a complete victory for Terra.

Compared with the work of modern masters the plot is crude, the style that of a rank amateur. But, as an outstanding example of the first attempts in this field of writing, it is worthy of a high place in any fantasy collection. The illustrations are unusual adaptations of the newspaper cuts which accompanied the first printing of the serial, the binding and printing excellent.

And the book contains a short critical summary of Mr. Serviss' contributions to the field of science-fiction written by A. Langley Searles, as well as a complete bibliography of his printed works, making the volume an invaluable acquisition for research in this field.

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THE BOOK MARK

We appreciate your letters but do not feel we receive enough of them. Please write us giving your comments on FANTASY BOOK, and especially, your criticisms.

The story ratings of the first issue follow:

- 1st. Van Vogt's THE CATAAAAA
- 2nd. Hasse's WALLS OF ACID
- 3rd. North's THE PEOPLE OF THE CRATER

Please send us your ratings of the stories in this issue. Your comments will assist us in selecting material for future issues.

THE SHIP OF DARKNESS
LITTLE JOHNNY
BARGAIN WITH BEELZEBUB
STAR OF THE UNDEAD
CAVERNS OF ITH
THE MACHINE-GOD LAUGHS

And now, a cross-section of our readers' reactions to FANTASY BOOK number one.

A Classic

Let me say that I believe that with F.B. you have produced a classic. The magazine is the finest of its kind I have yet seen published and I have known them all for 25 years. The advertisements are a find to the collector also.

HARMON FLORER

Good But Short

Congrats on your first issue. It was good. The format wasn't what I had expected, but this will be fine for binding provided you publish at least 12 issues the same size.

The stories were all good but short. I don't care for the "Black Lotus" type of story. How about another story by Braanol?

If anyone is interested in the NATIONAL FANTASY FAN FEDERATION please contact me for all details.

PAUL DOERR

203 East State Street, Sharon, Pa.

Cover Unsuitable

First, I want to compliment you on the splendid job you have done with your new periodical, "Fantasy Book". I have only one criticism to make, that is about the cover. The design on the cover I thought a bit unsuitable for the type of magazine which you are offering. Why not stick to 'fantasy' throughout the entire book, including the cover? To my way of thinking, SEX is not fantasy. Perhaps I'm wrong (?). "People of the Crater" was especially good. Let's have more of North's writings in the very near future.

GARY FORDYCE

Artists Careless

First the cover: Despite your editorial intentions this cover though well rendered, was about as shallow as a dry river.

I like your ads!

I liked your editorial.

I thought Van Vogt's story worth more than the price of the magazine. It is painfully true and maybe one of the reasons why such as I write letters to science fiction editors—or even why I like to read it.

Andrew North appeared to be trying to imitate Merritt and ended a poor second to Hannes Bok whom I would like to see in your publication both as a writer and an artist.

Speaking of artists. Yours show promise but also careless-

ness in rendering in most cases. Stories were all O.K. except for North whom I imagine will be well liked by enough other people to keep him going. There is no reason why he can't be great. Van Vogt is still your best bet.

Keep up the good work; you are already in the top four, which was top three until you came along.

ROSCOE E. WRIGHT

Micro-Man Outstanding

Your first cover impressed me tremendously. I have seen an awfully lot of magazine covers these last twelve years, but seldom one as beautifully satisfying as your first Milo display. I have shown the mag around to quite a number of people since I received it, and opinion seems to be unanimous that the Milo piece was outstanding. Puts the average pulp mag cover to shame, for sure.

Well, that started the mag off in fine fashion, but I'm afraid you plunged from the sublime to the ridiculous. Your featured story, the one that has been receiving the lion's share of publicity and cover mention was certainly terrible. Actually it was the only thing I could find wrong with your first issue. I wish you had selected anyone of your short stories as lead-off tale, for all were uniformly good and readable. Outstanding among the shorts were "Micro-Man" by Wright and "Walls of Acid". For the record's sake, let me put in my bid for "Micro-Man" as the best writing in issue one. I won't forget that "red splotch" on the typing ribbon for a long time, believe me.

Interior art-work was quite satisfactory with McNutt and Murphy pleasing with respective contributions. And that cover... ah...there we go again. A gorgeous thing...

GEORGE R. COWIE

Interesting and Entertaining

There is, and I believe always has been, an unhealthy tendency in the fantasy field for magazines to over-specialize; editorial policies become so narrow that all the stories in any one magazine conform to a single pattern—which rapidly becomes boring. You promise that such will not be the case with FB; congratulations for trying, and here's hoping your intentions are fulfilled.

No. 1 contains no really outstanding story, but all the material was interesting and entertaining. Best are the yarns of Bloch, Walton, and Van Vogt... "Strange Alliance" would have been better if it had ended with the werewolves running off in glee, but it's a better-than-average job anyway.

The artwork is above average, too, though the quality varies rather oddly. All three artists are quite promising; Murphy's picture for "Black Lotus" being little short of magnificent.

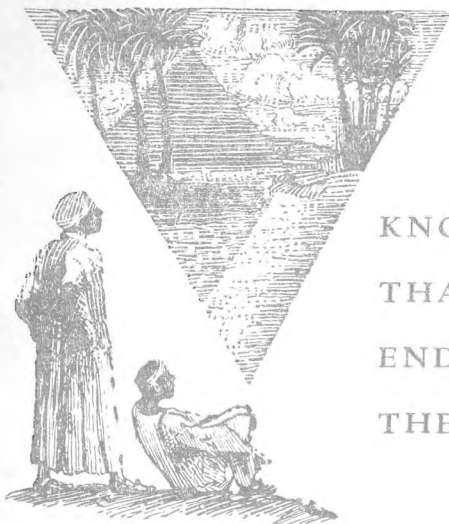
Oh, the cover.... Well, the colors are fairly restrained; I'll say that much for it—but no more.

The book paper in my subscription copy is fine; well worth the slightly higher price. I hope you can continue this distinctive feature.

I understand you have material by Festus Pragnell and David H. Keller on hand. These are two Old Masters of whom we've seen too little in recent years.

Well, I wish you all good luck. Here's hoping you'll keep your standards high—and that you manage to establish the magazine on a regular schedule very soon.

PAUL SPENCER



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